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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

THE TRAGIC SENSE OF LIFE IN ABSALOM, ABSALOM!

by



WARWICK BURGESS

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH  
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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled "The Tragic Sense of Life in Absalom, Absalom!" submitted by Warwick Burgess in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



For Hans, who understands why.





## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the possibility that Faulkner may incorporate Unamuno's concept of the "tragic sense of life", as well as some of Aristotle's principles of tragedy, in Absalom, Absalom!.

The discussion begins with an examination of Unamuno's belief that the tragic sense of life is a kind of pre-philosophy which emerges from a particular aspect of temperament or bent of mind which is latent in all of us. The thesis then examines Aristotle's more important tragic principles in the Poetics and clarifies some of his terminology in the context of twentieth-century language. The figures of Thomas Sutpen, Charles Bon, Henry Sutpen, and Quentin Compson are assessed on the basis of Aristotle's criteria for the complete "tragic hero", and the conclusion is drawn that none of the figures meet all the heroic requirements--although the portrayal of their characters helps to evoke the reader's tragic sense of life. Faulkner's use of the myths of ancient Greece, the Bible, and the nineteenth-century South in Absalom, Absalom! is then compared to Aristotle's views on the use of myth. Finally, an examination of Faulkner's complex plot and narrative structure reveals that these structures violate Aristotelean principles of plot usage such as "unity", "wholeness", and a "certain magnitude". Nevertheless, these



structures are effective in evoking our tragic sense of life and in allowing us to come to a clearer understanding of Faulkner's tragic vision.

It appears that there may be a direct link between Unamuno's concept of the tragic sense of life and some of Aristotle's more subjective elements such as the interaction of fear and pity in "catharsis", the view of the writer as a "maker", and the concept of a tragic work of art being an "imitation of an action". It is also possible that the tragic sense of life may be combined with these Aristotelean elements not only in Absalom, Absalom! but in most tragic works, even though the form and structure of tragedy appear to have changed substantially from the Athenian age to the twentieth-century.





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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Even though there are melodramatic elements present, the sensitive person is not normally left with a final impression of melodrama when reading William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!. The ultimate experience is usually an overwhelming sense of the tragedy of the drama that the author depicts, leading the reader eventually to an awareness of a tragic vision encompassing all mankind. And it may be that this vision is rooted in, and develops from, a particular bent of mind which Unamuno<sup>1</sup> identifies as the "tragic sense of life". This "tragic sense", in his conception, is not based upon a sophisticated or complex philosophical view of life; it is more a pre-philosophy, "more or less formulated, more or less conscious",<sup>2</sup> a facet of temperament which "does not so much flow from ideas as determine them".<sup>3</sup>

Unamuno contends that "philosophy", contrary to the usual conception of the term, is not a way of thinking that provides a framework within which we form "a complete and unitary conception of the world and of life, and





as a result of this conception, a feeling which gives birth to an inward attitude and even to outward action."<sup>4</sup> The fact is that the order of progression is the other way around; the "feeling" is the cause of our particular philosophical outlook, not the consequence:

Our philosophy--that is, our mode of understanding or not understanding the world and life--springs from our feeling towards life itself. And life, like everything affective, has roots in subconsciousness, perhaps in unconsciousness.<sup>5</sup>

And the tragic sense of life, in Unamuno's view, is a vital factor in the formulation of this "feeling toward life" which gives rise to our inward attitude and outward action. Yet this sense is not limited to a select group of individuals; it is latent in all of us and may be evoked by experience, even though some individuals, and some "whole peoples", are more emotionally inclined in this direction than are others.

It can be argued at this point, of course, that Unamuno's concept is irrelevant in any comprehensive discussion of tragedy because it is essentially an egotistical position; everyone's philosophical point of view is determined solely by his own life, with no consideration for the rest of mankind or the universe. But Unamuno eventually comes to counteract this argument by pointing out that the only way we can come to know humanity is by



an examination of the one human being to whom we have access. All levels of knowledge which we may ultimately be able to achieve may be based upon the egotistical instinct of self-preservation:

. . . it is the instinct of self-preservation that makes perceptible for us the reality and truth of the world; for it is this instinct that cuts out and separates that which exists for us from the unfathomable and illimitable region of the possible. In effect, that which has existence for us is precisely that which, in one way or another, we need to know in order to exist ourselves; objective existence, as we know it, is a dependence of our personal existence.<sup>6</sup>

But, the argument continues, man does not function in an individual vacuum, he:

. . . does not live alone; he is not an isolated individual, but a member of society. There is not a little truth in the saying that the individual, like the atom, is an abstraction . . . And if the individual maintains his existence by the instinct of self-preservation, society owes its being and maintenance to the individual's instinct of perpetuation. And from this instinct, or rather from society, springs reason.

Reason, that which we call reason, reflex and reflective knowledge, the distinguishing mark of man, is a social product.<sup>7</sup>

Thus we can see that Unamuno's position is not purely egotistical; it is primarily by plumbing the depths of our own temperament that we come to know humanity.

If we accept this point of view, any tragic vision that we finally attain may be initially dependent upon our





attitude toward life, an emotional cast of thought that allows us to empathize with the sense of man's fate that is being projected by another temperament: one holding the tragic vision. The tragic sense of life, as Sewall perceptively observes, is:

. . . the sense of ancient evil, of the mystery of human suffering, of the gulf between aspiration and achievement. It colours the tragic artist's vision of life (his theoretic form) and gives his works their peculiar shade and tone. It speaks, not the language of systematic thought, but through symbolic action, symbol and figure, diction and image, sound and rhythm. Such a recognition should precede any attempt to talk "systematically" about tragedy, while not denying the value of the attempt itself.<sup>8</sup>

It is because of the implications of this "recognition" that we are examining Unamuno's concept at some length before proceeding with a critical discussion of Absalom, Absalom! as a tragic work of art. If we begin with this concept in mind the experience of tragedy becomes a very personal and individual reaction to a particular work, and one of the most fascinating aspects of the critical examination is the determination of how the author has managed to play upon our tragic sense of life.

If we work from Unamuno's position that this tragic sense of life is based upon an emotional attitude, it becomes obvious that the writer of tragedy bears the burden of devising the means of leading the reader to an em-



otional state in which the exhilarating catharsis of tragedy may be experienced. The reader must be brought to a point at which he "creates" his own tragedy. In order that a tragedy be "successful" the author must not only possess the tragic sense of life, he must be able to evoke a kindred sense in the beholder.

But even though it may be essential, as Sewall contends, that we have some understanding of Unamuno's concept before undertaking a critical examination of a tragic work, his position appears to be too subjective and too speculative to support the examination without reference to other authorities. What is needed, it seems, is some principles which are somewhat more objective and perhaps more universally accepted as critical guidelines in the discussion of tragedy. In any serious examination of the merits of a tragic work most critics eventually return to those principles of tragedy laid down by Aristotle; the influence of the Greek tragedians and commentators such as Aristotle is still a vital force in any assessment of tragedy and the tragic vision. The criteria that he proposes in the Poetics for the evaluation of Athenian tragedy are still reflected in most definitive statements about tragedy more than two thousand years after the criteria were formulated. Certainly some peculiarities of Athenian trag-



edy--the division into the quantitative parts of Prologue, Episode, Exode, and the Choric Song, the necessity for music, the use of a chorus--are not typical of most modern tragedies nor do they appear to be essential in achieving the tragic effect. But the fundamental precepts in Aristotle's tragic pattern must be considered in any critical examination of a tragic work of art.

In Chapter VI of the Poetics Aristotle enunciates his famous definition of tragedy, which is the core of the work:

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions. By "language embellished," I mean language into which rhythm, "harmony," and song enter. By "the several kinds into separate parts," I mean that some parts are rendered through the medium of verse alone, others again with the aid of song.<sup>9</sup>

Although he makes clear the meaning of some of the terms within the context of the definition, we must remember that the connotation of others, such as "imitation" and "action", is quite different from the twentieth-century usage. Since these terms are crucial not only to the definition but to our examination of his precepts, it is imperative that we attempt to clarify just what he means when he uses them.





"Imitation", as Aristotle uses it, does not have the modern connotation of superficial copying, creating an artificial likeness, or reproducing a style or manner. In Fyfe's<sup>10</sup> interpretation of Aristotle's use of the term, the poet is considered to be a "maker" who takes a traditional story and re-presents it as filtered through his own personality. The resultant effect is that the writer is essentially creating something new since he is interpreting the well-known events in the light of his own emotions and perceptions. Furthermore, Aristotle does not insist that the new work adhere rigidly to the details of the original story; he is concerned with the cause-effect relationships not the chronological recording of events:

The truth he [the poet] tells is of universal application, even though he is telling the story of events which actually happened to real people, for even so he is the "maker" of the story, because he so selects the incidents as to show how and why they occurred.<sup>11</sup>

Thus by "imitation" Aristotle, in modern terms, means the taking of an old tale or myth and creating what is essentially a new story by filtering it through the personality and perceptions of the author.

By "action" Aristotle does not merely mean the events, deeds, or physical activities, he also means the process of working out the character motivations which precipitate





them. As Fergusson points out in his introduction to the Poetics:

. . . Aristotle tells us that action springs from two "natural causes", character and thought. A man's character disposes him to act in certain ways, but he actually acts only in response to the changing circumstances of his life, and it is his thought (or perception) that shows him what to seek and what to avoid in each situation. Thought and character together make his actions. . . . When Aristotle says "action" (praxis) in the Poetics, he usually means the whole working out of a motive to its end in success or failure. (PO,8-9)

And this "working out of a motive", with the resultant effect upon the beholder is, of course, the core of tragic art.

Although we will examine the various concepts in Aristotle's definition in detail as we discuss the merits of Absalom Absalom! as a tragic work, it is important to note at this point that he is not only concerned with the principles of writing tragedy, he is also deeply concerned with the effect upon the audience or reader. In his view, it is essential that we experience the emotions of "pity" and "fear" as we encounter tragedy. These emotions must be evoked if we are to experience the final "catharsis" and refining of emotions to the extent that we come to a fuller recognition and understanding of mankind as the tragic vision is achieved.

But what, precisely, does Aristotle mean by "pity",



"fear", and "catharsis"? In Chapter XIII of the Poetics he discusses the arousal of these emotions: "pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves" (PO,76). At first glance the usage appears relatively straightforward, but Brunius<sup>12</sup> argues that it is a mistake to interpret Aristotle's concept of pity as a kind of sympathy which gives us pleasure. He suggests that when Aristotle talks of pity and fear in relation to tragedy he is not identifying two separate and distinct emotions but a "specific state of mind where pity and fear interact."<sup>13</sup> He goes outside the Poetics to substantiate his claim that Aristotle combines pity and fear as he points out that:

. . . in the eighth chapter of the second book of The Rhetoric, pity is defined as a sort of pain at seeing an evident evil of a destructive or painful kind inflicted upon somebody, who does not deserve it, the evil being one which we might expect to happen to ourselves or to some of our friends, and this at a time when it is said to be near at hand . . . pity turns into fear when the object is so nearly related to us that the suffering seems to be our own, and we pity others in circumstances in which we should fear for ourselves.<sup>14</sup>

If we accept this interpretation of pity and fear interacting within a specific state of mind, it becomes obvious that we have a direct link with Unamuno's tragic sense, and with the recognition that we ultimately create our own tragedy.





In our reading of the Poetics, the "catharsis" obviously takes place in the mind of the beholder, not, as some critics suggest, in the structure of the drama itself;<sup>15</sup> but we must still attempt to cope with the critical arguments that have been advanced concerning the precise definition of the term. In his excellent and detailed examination of the matter, Brunius<sup>16</sup> maintains that katharsis ultimately cannot be considered solely as a "religious purification of the mind", nor taken totally in the medical sense of a therapy which is "mainly a mental one but . . . acts analogously to bodily purgation." Psychological interpretations, he cautions, are too refined and too subtle; moreover, they are difficult to sustain in isolation even though:

. . . all the interpretations of katharsis have to give psychological observations concerning the mixture of pain and pleasure and concerning the change from intense passionate response to an experience of relief and calmness.<sup>17</sup>

Brunius goes on to suggest that any single, precise definition of the term is extremely difficult to formulate and that in any case such a definition is probably unnecessary since, even in Aristotle's time: "It is obvious that katharsis had a vague metaphorical halo in its use."<sup>18</sup> What is important--and this is the crux of the matter--is to realize that the various meanings of katharsis:





. . . have to be combined, in one way or another, with the reaction of pity and fear. The katharsis happens in the reaction of pity and fear. This reaction is changed from violence into a just mean between the extremes of too strong and too mild. Or the reaction is changed from private violence into a kind of intellectual harmony. Another alternative is that the reaction is changed so that it is not dominated by pain but by pleasure. Or this change is a change from a physical reaction into a more refined mental or spiritual reaction. These explanations emphasize that the reaction of pity and fear is changed, and the change is called katharsis.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, if we accept Brunius' concept, catharsis is an emotional state of mind in which pity and fear may interact in a variety of ways. And in tragedy this interaction is, in Aristotle's view, followed by an ultimate feeling of transcendence and awe. There is a sense of tranquility which comes when passion is spent; the tension of the mind is released and pain gives way to pleasure as the tragedy satisfies the universal human need to contemplate some truth: "the pleasure felt in things imitated" (PO,55). And we are "thrilled with awe at the greatness of the issues thus unfolded . . . In this sense of awe the emotions of fear and pity are blended."<sup>20</sup>

In the definitive Sixth Chapter of the Poetics and in the succeeding chapters which are devoted to explaining it, Aristotle enumerates a number of principles which he considers to be of varying degrees of importance in creating



tragedy. Obviously we cannot discuss them all in detail, but we can abstract the principal tenets which seem to be of most value in our examination of Absalom, Absalom! as a tragic work of art.

First of all, he enumerates six constituent elements which he considers to be essential in tragedy. Plot (making) is most important; throughout the whole of the Poetics there is a sustained insistence on the vital significance of plot. It is "the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy" (PO,63). Character (delineation)--and this has tended in modern critical writing to centre on the "tragic hero"--"holds the second place" (PO, 63). Thought (or perception) is next, the tragic characters must have "the faculty of saying what is possible and pertinent in given circumstances" (PO,63). The fourth element is diction, "the expression of the meaning in words" (PO,64); it is the medium through which the writer's agents make known his feelings. The next element, music or song, is, as we have seen, not typical of most modern tragedy. And strangely enough, apart from declaring that of "the remaining elements Song holds the chief place among the embellishments" (PO,64), Aristotle devotes little time to any examination of this device in the tragedy of his age. Spectacle is the last element, and here he id-



entifies that which is more the province of the "stage machinist" than that of the writer; it is the methods used in the presentation of the story on the stage to arouse the audience's interest. Aristotle considers it to be a lower level of art than the act of creating the tragic work since "the power of Tragedy, we may be sure, is felt apart from representation and actors" (PO,64).

Having now laid a foundation for the examination of Absalom, Absalom! as a tragic work, we can begin to speculate upon a number of intriguing and important questions. Is there, for example, any direct connection between Unamuno's tragic sense of life and Aristotle's principles in a critical examination of a tragic work such as Ab-salom, Absalom!? Is it necessary to follow Aristotle's complete tragic pattern in order to evoke the tragic sense and the interaction of the emotions of pity and fear? Has Faulkner followed Aristotle's precepts in Absalom, Absalom! or is his method significantly different? Is his tragic method in the work effective, and if it is effective, what are the reasons? Are there certain elements that are inherent in all tragedy? Are modern sensibilities different from those of the Athenians; is our society, particularly that of America, so "new" that a different type of tragedy is required? Does Absalom, Absalom! provide





one? And these are the questions that we will attempt to resolve as we proceed with our examination of Absalom, Absalom! as a tragic work of art.





## CHAPTER II

### THE TRAGIC HERO

One of the most important and useful devices used by writers of tragedy in the evocation of the tragic sense of life and the achievement of the tragic vision is the portrayal of a tragic hero; and in Absalom, Absalom! Faulkner appears to follow in the tradition. There is little question that Thomas Sutpen is intended to resemble some of the great classic tragic figures, and our first problem will be to determine whether or not Faulkner does in fact evoke a "complete" tragic hero in the novel. Since there are numerous definitions and conceptions of what constitutes a tragic figure, it is obviously necessary that some criteria be established upon which the examination may be based. And since most critics eventually refer to the concept of tragedy and the tragic hero that Aristotle develops in the Poetics,<sup>1</sup> this is the base that will be used, at least in the initial discussion.

According to Aristotle's concept of tragedy, it is necessary, as we have seen, that the audience or reader



experience the cathartic interaction of the emotions of pity and fear. If the hero is a good and noble man "brought from prosperity to adversity" (PO,75), we feel a great deal of indignation rather than pity. If an "utter villain" meets the same fate we tend to applaud the fact that he has met his just reward. It is the downfall of the intermediate kind of a man--"the character between these two extremes" (PO,76)--that excites the highest level of interaction of pity and fear in the beholder. But even though the ideal tragic hero should be this intermediate kind of a man, it is important that his character should be "appropriate": "He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous--a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families" (PO,76). While it may be difficult for the modern viewer or reader to accept this view that the tragic hero must be of "high estate" since contemporary tragedy often uses heroes that are from the middle or lower classes of society, it seems that the remark must be placed in the context of the Athenian age in order to understand Aristotle's precept:

At first tragedy was written about the great of the earth simply because, from its religious origins, its characters were of divine or heroic race. And if this custom had arisen by accident, yet there was reason also for its continuance; for Greek tragedy was idealistic, its figures larger than life. Besides,



the higher the estate, the greater the fall that follows.<sup>2</sup>

We must realize, then, that in this particular instance Aristotle's tragic hero is placed within a tradition which is foreign to our own but one which would be familiar and intelligible to his contemporaries.

In Aristotle's view, the hero's disastrous downfall must come about as the result of his own actions, but with the proviso that his "misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty" (PO,76). And the phrase "some error or frailty", Butcher's version of the Greek ἀμαρτία --"hamartia"--is one of a number of translations of a term that has long been a source of scholarly speculation and dispute. Critical writers appear to be divided into two main camps, one made up of those who favor viewing "hamartia" as a "tragic flaw" in character and those who conceive of it as a "tragic error" of judgment.<sup>3</sup> But a full-scale examination of this controversy is beyond the scope of our discussion and perhaps the most useful view of the whole matter can be found in the concept proposed by Dyer:

Tragedy, Aristotle suggests, is about men who are at first successful and are later found to have a "great fault", which leads to failure. This fault must emerge in their actions and decisions, for it is on these that success or failure depend. But Aristotle does not at-





tempt to define whether faults are primarily errors of judgment, the results of inadequate moral or religious attitudes, or simply the results of inadequate information. It is the task of the tragedian to show us that the transition from success to failure happens not through accidents . . . for that is not "tragic", but through a great ἁμαρτία in the hero's character. The tragedian is in a sense a coach in success or failure in life. But Aristotle does not prescribe to the tragedians what faults they are to produce as causes of failure. And if we look at the practice of the tragedians we find that they offer us errors of judgment . . . errors through ignorance . . . moral failings . . . etc. Aristotle places no straightjacket on the tragedians. He is as aware as we that much of the tragedians' greatness lies in their analysis of different types of flaw and error in human character and decision.<sup>4</sup>

Thus the important point is not whether the tragic hero's downfall is a result of an "error in judgment" or a "tragic flaw" in character--which in any case are often extremely difficult to separate, but that through "some error or frailty" he has created the mechanism for his own ruin.

Closely interwoven with the concept of "hamartia" is that of "peripety": the "Reversal of the Situation . . . a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity" (PO,72). But we must be careful, as House cautions, not to consider "peripety" as a "simple plot" manipulation which:

. . . involves a radical change from good to bad fortune. "Peripeteia" must not be translated or paraphrased "Reversal of Fortune"; for a reversal of fortune may well



happen without it. If it is to be paraphrased at all, the phrase which fits best is "reversal of intention". For that is what it is, from the point of view of the character involved.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, House continues:

In the word peripety is contained the idea of the boomerang or recoil effect of one's own actions, of being hoist with one's own petard, falling into the pit that one has dug for someone else. The action is complex because it moves on two levels, as it appears to the doer and as it really is, and because the cause of the disaster is woven in with the good intentions and right means to achieve them.<sup>6</sup>

And the significance of the statement that the action "moves on two levels, as it appears to the doer and as it really is", becomes apparent when we consider the matter of the hero finally coming to terms with himself and achieving the tragic insight.

In order to meet Aristotle's criteria for the complete tragic hero, the protagonist must achieve "discovery" or "recognition", "a change from ignorance to knowledge" (PO,72). This can, of course, be taken to mean that the hero--Oedipus, for example--discovers who he actually is, or it can be mutual recognition "on both sides" (PO,73). It can also be taken to mean that the "change from ignorance to knowledge" is the probable or necessary result of the succession of incidents in the plot. But in its profoundest sense, it appears that Aristotle means "re-



cognition" to be a kind of "self-knowledge" that tragic figures achieve through passion or suffering. As a result of this passion or suffering a new perception of the circumstances arises within the hero; there is an awakening from a state of ignorance to a sense of the mystery of life and the realization that the catastrophe ultimately has been created by his own disastrous actions.

One of the most difficult problems in any examination of Thomas Sutpen as a tragic hero is that we are never allowed to confront Sutpen the man. Our views of him are based upon our perceptions of the realities of the Sutpen myth. And our perceptions of the myth are developed by a narrative structure incorporating several narrative points of view which not only tends to keep the protagonist at a distance, but forces us, as we shall see in Chapter IV, to arrive at our judgment of Sutpen by using perceptions and impressions that are filtered through the minds of others. Nevertheless, even though Sutpen never enters the story, there is no question that for most readers he is the dominant figure in the novel since his legend is the base from which the different narrative points of view are developed. He is portrayed, like Aristotle's tragic hero, as an "intermediate" kind of a man, although one of prosperity and great reputation. Moreover, it is interesting,





from the modern reader's point of view, that he is depicted as "larger than life", at least in the minds of the narrators, who regard his achievements with awe even though their other emotional reactions vary widely. Miss Rosa's hysterical narrative portrays Sutpen as a terrifyingly supernatural and demonic figure:

*. . . he was not owned by anyone or anything in this world, had never been, would never be, not even by Ellen, not even by Jones' granddaughter. Because he was not articulated in this world. He was a walking shadow. He was the light-blinded bat-like image of his own torment cast by the fierce demoniac lantern up from beneath the earth's crust and hence in retrograde, reverse; from abysmal and chaotic dark to eternal and abysmal dark completing his descending (do you mark the gradation?) ellipsis, clinging, trying to cling with vain unsubstantial hands to what he hoped would hold him, save him, arrest him --Ellen (do you mark them?), myself, then last of all that fatherless daughter of Wash Jones' only child who, so I heard once, died in a Memphis brothel--to find severance (even if not rest and peace) at last in the stroke of a rusty scythe. I was told, informed of that too, though not by Jones this time but by someone else kind enough to turn aside and tell me he was dead. 'Dead?' I cried. 'Dead? You? You lie; you're not dead; heaven cannot, and hell dare not, have you!' 7*

It is, as Howe points out, astonishing when one considers the matter rationally that Sutpen has the power to dominate the novel in the fashion that he does, "shading each scene, altering the lives of all who touch or cross him."<sup>8</sup> And it is in the narrative of Miss Rosa that the "most





frightening evidence" of Sutpen's power is to be felt:

. . . as she rises to a hysteria of eloquence in castigating Sutpen, she unwittingly declares herself still subject to him. Were Sutpen to call from the grave, she would run to him, an appalled accessory to his diabolism.<sup>9</sup>

Mr. Compson's depiction of Sutpen is designed to counterbalance the hysterical vitality of Miss Rosa; the impersonality of his narrative gives the impression of an analytical and unbiased point of view as he recounts the townspeople's reaction to Sutpen's second return:

. . . when he came back this time, he was in a sense a public enemy. Perhaps this was because of what he brought back with him this time: the material he brought back this time, as compared to the simple wagonload of wild niggers which he had brought back before. But I don't think so. That is, I think it was a little more involved than the sheer value of his chandeliers and mahogany and rugs. I think that the affront was born of the town's realization that he was getting it involved with himself; that whatever the felony which produced the mahogany and crystal, he was forcing the town to compound it. (AA, 43-44)

Nevertheless, he too conceives of Sutpen as a hero larger than life, one reminiscent of the great heroes of the Greek tragedies. It is in the sections narrated by Mr. Compson that Sutpen appears closest to the concept of the tragic hero espoused by Aristotle. In Mr. Compson's view Sutpen is doomed to fall, "a victim of the impersonal, hostile forces around him and of his own tragic flaw."<sup>10</sup>



But Mr. Compson's vision of Sutpen as a figure larger than life is not altogether based on an association with the great classical figures; it is also a product of Mr. Compson's veneration for the men who fought for the South in the Civil War. In his view, Sutpen is not only such a man, his tragedy, as we shall see in Chapter III, comes to assume a more profound significance within the context of the heritage of the South. Sutpen's aspirations and failures are magnified, in Mr. Compson's interpretation, until they are equated with the myth of the South itself and his story becomes "the complete statement of Southern ambition, execution and success, guilt, doom, and destruction . . . as exemplified by the action of one man."<sup>11</sup> As the protagonist of Mr. Compson's narrative, Sutpen tends to assume tragic stature by virtue of the elevation of his story to a level where it represents the morality and actions of a whole social system.

The figure of Sutpen is distorted in Quentin's narrative because the story that he and Shreve ultimately develop is a product of their imaginations working upon the fragments and distortions of the Sutpen myth that they receive from others. Even though Quentin is familiar with the story, he is too young to have witnessed the events in the Sutpen saga and he is not content to fit the





pieces together as factually as possible; he must, in Aristotle's words, "imitate an action" for himself. And the figure that emerges from these imaginings is obviously no ordinary mortal. When Sutpen watches Miss Rosa disappear from Sutpen's Hundred after his outrageous proposal for a trial procreation, he is envisaged as:

*. . . standing there with the reins over his arm, with perhaps something like smiling inside his beard and about the eyes which was not smiling but the crinkled concentration of furious thinking--the haste, the need for it; the urgency but not fear, not concern: just the fact that he had missed that time, though luckily it was just a spotting shot with a light charge, and the old gun, the old barrel and carriage none the worse; only next time there might not be enough powder for both a spotting shot and then a full-sized load--the fact that the thread of shrewdness and courage and will ran onto the same spool which the thread of his remaining days ran onto and that spool almost near enough for him to reach out his hand and touch it. But this was no grave concern yet, since it (the old logic, the old morality which had never yet failed to fail him) was already falling into pattern, already showing him conclusively that he had been right, just as he knew he had been, and therefore what had happened was just a delusion and did not actually exist. (AA, 279-280)*

Thus there is a sort of grandeur to the man who persists in the pursuit of his "design" despite overwhelming opposition to its implementation. His energy and egoism cannot allow him to see that the attempt to create a dynasty is futile.





Sutpen is depicted in Quentin's section as an accomplished soldier, an able commander in the Civil War who is elected by his subordinates. His conduct in action is portrayed as impeccable and even heroic, "It aint that you were a brave man at one second or minute or hour of your life and got a paper to show hit from General Lee. But you are brave, the same as you are alive and breathing" (AA,284). But it is not only his public actions that are worthy of the tragic figure, his qualities in private life are often admirable:

His private integrity, manifested in innumerable small ways--his refusal to malign his first wife, his unwillingness to accept favors he cannot return, his establishment of man-to-man superiority over his slaves in sportsmanlike physical combat (as opposed to anonymous raids in the darkness, typical of others of his class), his searching for faults in his own acts rather than blaming others or Fate for his disappointments, his purposive adherence in conduct to the illuminations of his reason --these virtues confirm the largeness of his stature.<sup>12</sup>

And the phrase "his searching for faults in his own acts rather than blaming others or Fate for his disappointments" is highly significant in our discussion because the tragic figure, in Aristotle's terms of reference, must fall as the result of his own actions. We are confronted, in other words, with the problem of freewill versus determinism: does the protagonist really have any control over his dest-



iny? Do his thoughts and actions, in the final analysis, have any effect on the eventual outcome? If the hero's fate is indeed sealed by a deterministic deity or immutable laws over which he has no control, he is not a "tragic hero" because he ultimately has no voice in the determination of his destiny.

One of the complications of this problem is that in the tragic world individual actions often seem to have consequences that are irreversible and events occur that appear to be inevitable. In Absalom Absalom!, this intense feeling of an unrelenting, ominous movement towards a precipitous catastrophe is often aroused by the tone, the language, and the structure of the narrative. But if the reader can avoid being overwhelmed by this ominous feeling of inevitability, it becomes apparent that Sutpen does in fact largely determine his own fate; it is his "error or frailty", not some preordained force, which dooms the continuance of his dynasty.

Sutpen's attempt to establish a dynasty is, in Quentin's imaginings, triggered in the scene in which as a boy he is refused entrance at the front door of the white planter's mansion by a Negro servant, "and he never even remembered what the nigger said, how it was the nigger told him, even before he had had time to say what he came



for, never to come to that front door again but to go around to the back" (AA,232). From this point on he determines by his own courage and shrewdness to compete with and outdo the plantation owners whom he envies as a boy, and to conduct his life in terms of his conception of the ethical code of the South. But the "design", of course, is not limited to this initial impulse; it becomes increasingly apparent as we re-create the story of Sutpen's obsession with his design that his whole life comes to be concentrated on establishing a dynasty, that his attention "shifts from a project he can achieve in his own lifetime to . . . the age-old compulsion to insure immortality in the only imperfect manner nature will allow."<sup>13</sup> And from the time of the initial determination until Wash Jones' final "stroke of the rusty scythe", his whole life is concentrated upon achieving the progressive manifestations of his design. But his efforts, of course, are futile; he accomplishes nothing of any permanent value.

Cleanth Brooks<sup>14</sup> argues that the reason for Sutpen's failure is his "innocence" about the nature of reality. In Brooks' view, he never learns anything but retains his innocence to the end. His innocence, this critic contends, is typical of modern man:

. . . like modern man, Sutpen does not believe in Jehovah. He does not even believe in the goddess Tyche. He is not the victim of bad luck. He





has simply made a mistake. . . . Sutpen is a "planner" who works by blue-print and on a schedule. He is rationalistic and scientific, not traditional, not religious, not even superstitious. . . . The only people in Faulkner who are "innocent" are adult males; and their innocence comes down finally to a trust in rationality--an overweening confidence that plans work out--that life is simpler than it is.<sup>15</sup>

And it is not difficult to find passages in Absalom, Absalom! that support Brooks' plea for innocence. Sutpen himself asserts that the reason for his failure is simply a "mistake" in his design:

You see, I had a design in my mind. Whether it was a good or a bad design is beside the point; the question is, Where did I make the mistake in it, what did I do or misdo in it, whom or what injure by it to the extent which this would indicate. I had a design. (AA,263)

Nor does he shift from this position as he continues his attempts to find a "rational" solution for the failure of his design; he retains his self-delusion until the end.

But we must be very cautious about accepting this point of view as the final definitive statement about a figure of Sutpen's magnitude. We must not assume a simplistic position even though there are repeated assertions that Sutpen is "innocent". We must remember that this view of innocence is to a large extent based upon Sutpen's appraisal of himself, which is passed on by General Compson to his son, who in turn passes it on to Quentin. At this point the narrative has the appearance of objectivity





because of the distancing from the reader, but the fact remains that it is primarily the protagonist's self-conception that filters through to the reader.

A much more serious problem with the view of Sutpen as innocent is the one of semantics. Brooks attempts to clarify this matter with his contention that Sutpen's "innocence" is not to be confused with the normal connotation of the term, but that it signifies an innocence about the nature of reality based upon his "trust in rationality". But while this distinction is useful, it does not go far enough. Faulkner's use of the word seems ultimately to mean a condition in which the hero is made captive to the vision of his own destiny; he is so engrossed in the pursuit of his "design" that the idea of sin or the recognition of the destructive effects of his acts upon others never occur to him. And thus in a curious sense, as Howe points out, Sutpen is innocent:

. . . he cannot fully reckon the consequences of what he does, the hunger that impels his "design" remains obscure to him. He harms no one out of malice or sadism, and he is not without sense, particularly in the hysterical years after the War. These very qualities serve only to intensify his destructiveness, for Faulkner realizes that a premeditated and impersonal act of evil can be more dangerous than a quick impulse to hurt.<sup>16</sup>

In the context of our discussion this is a significant comment since it emphasizes that while Sutpen actively



searches for the reason for his failure, the concern does not lessen the destructiveness of his actions upon his antagonists. What is important in the final analysis is that he appears incapable of grasping the implications of the results of his actions upon the intimate relationships that operate in the family and in society; he retains his self-delusion until the end, unable to come to the realization that his failure is the result of his persistence in adamantly pursuing a selfish, premeditated, and destructive course of action.

Thus Sutpen realizes that his design has failed but he is unable to ascertain the cause of the failure, what "mistake" he has made. But his failure, like that of the classical hero, is in his "hamartia". He destroys any hope for a continuation of his dynasty, by renouncing an heir whom he believes to be tainted with Negro blood, because he is unable to abandon the tradition of the South. His mistake, ironically, is that he is unable to repudiate the restrictions of the caste system which earlier had affronted him. So the wheel has come full circle and Sutpen in his turn is refusing entry to one who could have ensured the continuance of his dynasty:

. . . he stood there at his own door, just as he had imagined, planned, designed, and sure enough and after fifty years the forlorn nameless and homeless lost child came to





knock at it and no monkey-dressed nigger anywhere under the sun to come to the door and order the child away; and Father said that even then, even though he knew that Bon and Judith had never laid eyes on one another, he must have felt and heard the design--house, position, posterity and all--come down like it had been built out of smoke, making no sound, creating no rush of displaced air and not even leaving any debris. (AA,267)

And in his continued and adamant refusal to recognize Bon he sets the stage for the catastrophe which not only destroys Charles but also removes the last hope for the perpetuation of his dynasty: Henry Sutpen.

Thus Sutpen's world is destroyed by actions which stem from his tragic "error or frailty". But he fails to attain the stature of great tragic heroes such as Oedipus or Lear because he does not achieve self-recognition, he does not come to terms with himself.<sup>17</sup> And without the tragic insight there cannot be the reconciliation and the transcendence of fate of Aristotle's tragic hero. Yet despite his ultimate inadequacy, he sways the emotions of the reader with a great deal of the magnificence and tragic dignity of the classical hero.

Faulkner uses Charles Bon and Henry Sutpen, like Gloucester and Edgar in King Lear, as mirror figures to reflect and comment upon the actions of the main protagonist. But in the Quentin-Shreve sections of the novel the reader is tempted to regard one or both of them as





being tragic figures in their own right. It is not Thomas Sutpen that most interests Quentin and Shreve, it is the Bon-Henry-Judith relationship, and in particular the reason why Henry kills Bon; for them the climax of the story is the death of Charles. As Shreve attempts to create some kind of meaning out of the Sutpen myth in his dialogue with Quentin, Bon emerges as a kind of fatalistic hero:

. . . think how they must have talked, how Henry would say, "But must you marry her? Do you have to do it?" and Bon would say, "He should have told me. He should have told me, myself, himself. I was fair and honorable with him. I waited. You know now why I waited. I gave him every chance to tell me himself. But he didn't do it. If he had, I would have agreed and promised never to see her or you or him again. But he didn't tell me. I thought at first it was because he didn't know. Then I knew that he did know, and still I waited. But he didn't tell me."  
(AA,341)

Quentin and Shreve conceive of Bon as a tragic figure who, in a fit of despair, forces Henry to kill him by taunting him with barbs such as: "*So it's the miscegenation, not the incest, which you cant bear*" (AA,356), and "*I'm the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me, Henry*" (AA, 358). But his death, in the context of the whole novel, appears not so much an individual tragedy as a tragedy of much broader proportions:

His sudden determination to marry Judith against Henry's command, after his long submission to the outcome of Henry's in-



ternal debate, is touched off by the realization that he has been rejected by Sutpen and Henry, not as a man, or even as Judith's brother, but in toto--as Negro.<sup>18</sup>

Thus the tragedy of this figure is not only that of the man Charles Bon, it is also the more profound tragedy of the Negro-White relationships in the South. In this sense, Bon does not emerge as the complete tragic figure; he is sacrificed to illustrate the tragedy of a race, not an individual, even though, as we shall see in Chapter III, Faulkner uses the myth of the South to tell the stories of individual tragedies.

Moreover, as a tragic figure Bon tends to remain rather enigmatic and detached throughout the work; Faulkner does not examine him in the depth that he does Sutpen or Quentin himself. We never really learn what he does and how others react to him. What we know of Bon is based largely upon the imaginings of Shreve as he is drawn increasingly into the story and begins to create his own concept of character, motive, and emotions:

*So at last I shall see him, whom it seems I was bred up never to expect to see, whom I had even learned to live without, thinking maybe how he would walk into the house and see the man who made him and then he would know; there would be that flash, that instant of indisputable recognition between them and he would know for sure and forever--thinking maybe That's all I want. He need not even acknowledge me; I will let him understand just*



*as quickly that he need not do that, that I do not expect that, will not be hurt by that, just as he will let me know that quickly that I am his son. . . .* (AA,319)

Thus in Shreve's "imitation of an action" Bon comes close to being a tragic hero. Yet his soul mate, Quentin, is the only other one in the work who is able to share this vision to any extent. But the story that Quentin and Shreve create is so plausible and so compelling that the reader tends to be swept along by their imaginings of the sufferings and injustices that Bon endures, although it is rather ironic that we should experience this when there is some difficulty for many of us in identifying with Sutpen who does not receive the same sympathetic treatment. Bon, after all, is a shadowy image of his father; he presses forward toward the achievement of a "design" with the same ruthlessness, intelligence, and courage, and in the end he too is destroyed by a pride that allows no self-recognition. As Bradford points out, Charles Bon, in his inflexibility and single-mindedness of purpose:

. . . probably "needs killing" when Henry finally brings himself to do the deed.  
 . . . Henry's reason is love, love for his sister which outweighs his affection for his brother, even though he also loves that brother. So great is his passion that he is almost maddened by what his brother, sister, and father compel him to decide.<sup>19</sup>

Yet if we work from Bradford's position, Henry can







be seen as the real tragic hero, who, faced with an agonizing dilemma, destroys those most precious to him. Certainly Quentin-Shreve in their imaginings see Henry in this light:

*Now it is Bon who watches Henry; he can see the whites of Henry's eyes again as he sits looking at Henry with that expression which might be called smiling. His hand vanishes beneath the blanket and reappears, holding his pistol by the barrel, the butt extended toward Henry.*

*--Then do it now, he says.*

*Henry looks at the pistol; now he is not only panting, he is trembling; when he speaks now his voice is not even the exhalation, it is the suffused and suffocating inbreath itself:*

*--You are my brother.*

*--No I'm not. I'm the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me, Henry. (AA, 357-358)*

And given Sutpen's interpretation of the moral code of the nineteenth-century South, Henry has no alternative but to stop him--"its the miscegenation not the incest." His decision to kill Bon may be tragic in the individual sense because he kills a brother and ruins the life of a sister. But in the final analysis his tragedy transcends that of the individual and becomes the tragedy of the South, locked into a moral code and a way of life which it cannot escape: the only release is through catastrophe.

Furthermore, any evocation of Henry as a tragic hero is based almost exclusively upon the Quentin-Shreve sections of the story and these sections do not represent the



totality of material that the reader uses to create his own reality. As we have seen with Bon, Henry, in the final analysis, has insufficient substance to carry the main thrust of the tragedy, which is, of course, the reason that Faulkner devotes much more time to defining Sutpen's legend than theirs.

Nevertheless, it is very tempting for the reader to envisage Bon and Henry as verging on tragic figures because we, together with Quentin and Shreve, find it easier to identify with them than with Sutpen, and also because we see them as their father's victims. Though they may only be tragic heroes in the creative imaginations of the youthful narrators, the vision that Quentin and Shreve create arouses our tragic sense of life and adds to the grandeur and urgency of the tragic vision that is being projected.

Ultimately, the tragedy of Quentin confronts us too, as he struggles to come to grips with the meaning of the of the Sutpen story. At first Quentin appears detached and even a little bored with the memories that his elders insist on imposing upon him:

. . . why tell me about it? What is it to me that the land of the earth or whatever it was got tired of him at last and turned and destroyed him? What if it did destroy her family too? It's going to turn and destroy us all some day, whether our name happens to be Sutpen or Coldfield or not.  
(AA,12)



But he is unable to resist the temptation to try to fit these recollections into some kind of a meaningful framework and, with Shreve as his collaborator, he becomes more and more deeply enmeshed in the myth. When he re-constructs the death of Bon in his mind:

It seemed to Quentin that he could actually see them . . . They faced one another on the two gaunt horses, two men, young, not yet in the world, not yet breathed over long enough, to be old but with old eyes . . . the pistol lying yet across the saddle bow unaimed, the two faces calm, the voices not even raised . . . . (AA,132-133)

And as he is drawn ever deeper into the story we see him visualizing the events with a reality that becomes so intense and painful that we ourselves experience a strange sense of joy mingled with our pity as he and Shreve come to be participants in the story:

*Maybe we are both Father. Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord to the next pool which the first pool feeds, has fed, did feed . . . Yes, we are both Father. Or maybe Father and I are both Shreve, maybe it took Father and me both to make Shreve or Shreve and me both to make Father or maybe Thomas Sutpen to make all of us. (AA,261-262)*

Their identification with Bon and Henry Sutpen is so complete that there are, "First, two of them, then four; now two again" (AA,345). And, incredibly, considering the diff-





erences in their background and culture, Faulkner continues to merge them until Quentin and Shreve themselves seem indistinguishable:

Shreve ceased again. It was just as well, since he had no listener. Perhaps he was aware of it. Then suddenly he had no talker either, though possibly he was not aware of this. Because now neither of them were there. They were both in Carolina and the time was forty-six years ago, and it was not even four now but compounded still further, since now both of them were Henry Sutpen and both of them were Bon, compounded each of both yet either neither. . . . (AA,351)

But in spite of this wonderful moment when they seem to become one, it is Quentin and not Shreve who eventually comes closer to attaining the stature of a tragic figure. As we will see in Chapter IV, Shreve's ultimate purpose is to serve as a sounding board, a participant who, at the end, returns to his role as the voice of the rational and the sceptical:

So it took Charles Bon and his mother to get rid of old Tom, And Charles Bon and the octoroon to get rid of Judith, and Charles Bon and Clytie to get rid of Henry; and Charles Bon's mother and Charles Bon's grandmother got rid of Charles Bon. So it takes two niggers to get rid of one Sutpen, dont it? (AA,377-378)

Quentin, however, remains obsessed with the problems of the past. Despite the agony of his attempts to achieve an ordered reality in his vision of the Sutpen tragedy, he does not succeed. Like Hamlet, he feels the "cursed spite"



of his predestined involvement, yet:

Unlike Hamlet, he never speaks of his shattered illusions nor passes judgment. All we know is that the story in some way found him out, laid a question on his plate that he could not live with in peace.<sup>20</sup>

So we see that Quentin, too, is not Aristotle's complete tragic hero; he fails to achieve the ordering of reality and he is unable to determine the reason for his failure. It can be speculated, of course, that this may come after the novel ends, but this kind of speculation is rather fruitless since this is as far as Faulkner takes us. Yet, regardless of his failure, for many of us Quentin is a figure who in his search for meaning in the Sutpen myth exhibits a tragic sense of life, which in turn evokes our own sense of the tragic.

None of the protagonists, then, are complete tragic figures in the Aristotelean sense, and to insist that any one of them does fit into the mold is to warp the design and structure of the novel. It could be argued that one of more of the protagonists could be successfully evoked as a tragic hero in the context of a different conception of tragedy such as that of Hegel or Schopenhauer. But the significant point to be made is that the overwhelming sense of tragedy in Absalom, Absalom! is not wholly dependent upon the successful evocation of Arist-



otle's complete tragic hero. Yet despite the lack of this complete tragic hero there is no question that the figures that we have examined in this discussion help evoke our tragic sense of life and enable us to come to a greater awareness of the tragic vision that the artist is projecting.





### CHAPTER III

#### THE USE OF MYTH

Aristotle, as we have seen, postulates that the writer of tragedy is a "maker", who takes a traditional old story and re-presents it as filtered through his own perceptions and personality. In the Athenian age, the viewers of tragic drama were generally expected to know the story beforehand and the dramatists simply retold the same stories or myths over and over again. But with each retelling, the dramatist attempted to reinterpret the tale in the light of his own concept of the character motivations and in the light of a morality which may have changed somewhat since the story originated. In Chapter XIII of the Poetics, Aristotle concludes that the "best tragedies" are based on a few familiar myths: "the story of a few houses--on the fortunes of Alcmaeon, Oedipus, Orestes, Mel-eager, Thyestes, Telephus, and those others who have done or suffered something terrible" (PO,76). But we must be careful not to assume that he considered these myths to be the only basis for tragic writing. In Chapter IX, Arist-



otle cautions us that the use of traditional tales is not mandatory, that it is not imperative to: "at all costs keep to the received legends, which are the usual subjects of Tragedy. Indeed, it would be absurd to attempt it; for even subjects that are known are known only to a few, and yet give pleasure to all" (PO,69). So obviously he does not regard preliminary knowledge of the story on the part of the beholder to be absolutely essential; and the implication is that the good tragedian produces the tragic effect without relying on the prior knowledge of viewer or reader. Nevertheless, since Aristotle points out that these myths are the "usual subjects of Tragedy", since the implication of his comments in Chapter XIII may be that if these well-known tales were not the best, the drama with which he is dealing would have turned to other subject material, and since the examples of the "best tragedies" that he refers to throughout the Poetics generally fall into the category of traditional stories, we must conclude that Aristotle favors the plot which is based upon a familiar old legend or myth.

But what is the connection between Aristotle's view of the use of myth and Absalom, Absalom!? Faulkner obviously intends the most important sequence of events to be those in the life of Thomas Sutpen. And it is very



interesting that even though these events in themselves are obviously not a familiar old story to the reader, the various narrators make them appear to be so by the use of mythical allusion and analogy. One of the most obvious allusions is the numerous references to the Greek tragedies. Sutpen's mulatto daughter, for example, is called Clytemnestra or Clytie, although Mr. Compson tells Quentin that he prefers to believe that Sutpen intended to name her Cassandra, "prompted by some pure dramatic economy not only to beget but to designate the presiding augur of his own disaster" (AA,62). Miss Rosa is characterized as having "an air Cassandralike and humorless and profoundly and sternly prophetic" (AA,22). In Shreve's imaginative reconstruction of the Sutpen story the "old dame", Rosa --if her father had not died, and if Sutpen were not a demon--would not have had to go to Sutpen's Hundred "and be betrayed by the old meat and find instead of a widowed Agamemnon to her Cassandra an ancient stiff-jointed Pyramus to her eager though untried Thisbe" (AA,177). In addition, critics have identified analogues between Sutpen's story and several Greek legends; but possibly the most interesting to us, since Aristotle frequently refers to the works of Sophocles in the Poetics, are the analogies that link Absalom, Absalom! with the Oedipus legend.<sup>1</sup>





In Absalom, Absalom!, as in the Oedipus tragedies of Sophocles, there is a preoccupation with incest, although it is more central to the Greek stories than that of Faulkner. Both legends are concerned with the fact of a fratricide which is precipitated by the sins of the father; and the sin of the father, in both instances, is that of overweening pride. Both fathers, moreover, allow their eldest sons to go to their doom without consolation or hope. And Charles Bon, with his rejection by a father and the resultant attempt to regain his "rightful" place, is analogous to Oedipus' eldest son, Polyneices--although Bon is not as aggressive in his actions as his Greek counterpart. The younger son, Henry, can be seen as analogous to Eteocles; Henry, like Eteocles, kills his brother, and Henry too, for all intents and purposes, is destroyed by the act of fratricide. Both Judith and Antigone continue to care for their fathers despite the fact that the catastrophe that each has undergone is precipitated by the acts of her parent. And both legends revolve around the real identity of one of the protagonists--in one case that of Charles Bon, and in the other that of Oedipus--and the examination of the motivations and actions of the characters centers upon the repercussions of the discovery of this identity.<sup>2</sup>



But the parallels between the two legends are not always clear-cut. Oedipus achieves the recognition of Aristotle's complete tragic hero as he comes to the ghastly realization that he has killed his own father and committed incest with his mother:

O! O! all brought to pass! All truth! Now,  
O light, may I look my last upon you,  
having been found accursed in bloodshed,  
accursed in marriage, and in my coming into  
the world accursed!<sup>3</sup>

But Sutpen, as we have seen, does not achieve the recognition of the classical hero, nor does he achieve the peace of mind and the transcendence of fate at the end of his life that Oedipus achieves as he leaves to enter into the kingdom of his God:

Children, this day your father is gone from you.  
All that was mine is gone. You shall no longer  
Bear the burden of taking care of me--  
I know it was hard, my children.--And yet one word  
Makes all those difficulties disappear:  
That word is love.<sup>4</sup>

And though both fathers allow their eldest sons to go to their doom without hope or consolation, there is a vast difference in the method of rejection.<sup>5</sup> Sutpen's refusal to acknowledge Charles as son is conceived by Quentin and Shreve as one in which Bon "looked at the expressionless and rocklike face, at the pale boring eyes in which there was no flicker, nothing, the face in which he saw his own features, in which he saw recognition, and that was all"



(AA,348). But Oedipus' rejection of Polyneices is much more actively hostile as he pronounces his imprecation:

Now go! For I abominate and disown you!  
 You utter scoundrel! Go with the malediction  
 I here pronounce for you: that you shall never  
 Master your native land by force of arms,  
 Nor ever see your home again in Argos,  
 The land below the hills; but you shall die  
 By your own brother's hand, and you shall kill  
 The brother who banished you. For this I pray.  
 And cry out to the hated underworld  
 That it may take you home . . . 6

And in the Sutpen legend, the act of fratricide is to eliminate the problem of miscegenation. But in the legend of Oedipus, Polyneices and Eteocles kill each other in a battle for a kingdom; Eteocles falls in defence of his homeland, Polyneices in the act of aggression.

Yet despite the relative obscurity of some of the analogues, it is apparent that Faulkner deliberately introduces the references to Greek tragedy which are scattered throughout Absalom, Absalom! in order to help establish the feelings of doom, fatality, and tragic grandeur which permeate the work. But the most important function of the analogues is to help create the impression of presenting the Sutpen story as the re-creation of a traditional old myth.

The title of the novel itself is an obvious link to the Bible and the story of King David Of Israel and his sons in II Samuel. The tragedy implicit in the love re-





lationship of Henry-Judith-Bon is clearly intended as a parallel to that of Absalom-Tamar-Amnon in the Old Testament story. Bon, obviously, is meant to correspond to Amnon who commits incest with his half-sister Tamar, and Henry, in shooting Bon, is a parallel figure to Absalom, who kills his half-brother Amnon for the sin. Moreover, Sutpen, with his gigantic design, attempts to fulfill God's words to David: "And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever."<sup>7</sup>

But again the analogues are not clear-cut; Sutpen, for example, in our reading, differs greatly from the beneficent David. Although the common concept in the Sutpen-David analogy is obviously that "of a man who wanted sons and got sons who destroyed him".<sup>8</sup> Sutpen displays little of David's ultimate grief for his son, or at least he does not articulate it in the open manner in which David voices his torment: "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!"<sup>9</sup> And while in the house of Sutpen, as in the house of David, retribution against the one who attempts to establish a dynasty takes the form of a violent crime by a son, the ultimate cause of the tragic act is not the same. We must not carry the analogy between the two stories to the point that we consider that Henry kills



Bon to prevent an incestuous relationship with Judith; it is quite clear in Absalom, Absalom! that the root cause of Henry's violent and despairing act is "the miscegenation, not the incest." Yet as Levins points out, the fact that the analogues may not be clear-cut is not the significant point:

What is important is that Faulkner by means of thematic similarity--the concept of a dynasty, the threat of incest, the act of fratricide--and especially by means of the title itself is deliberately evoking the story of David, and by doing so he elevates the Sutpen legend through its juxtaposition with biblical myth.<sup>10</sup>

By deliberately evoking the story of David with its "thematic similarity", Faulkner not only enhances the tragic sense of the Sutpen story, he also creates an effect whereby the old biblical myth is re-presented by a "maker" in a setting in which the implications of the character motivations are examined within the context of a totally different era.

But despite the interest of the associations with the Greek myths and the importance of the juxtapositioning with the legend of David, perhaps the most significant myth that Faulkner uses in Absalom, Absalom! is that of the tragedy of the South. Some readers may not grasp the implications of the Greek references or may not



work out the thematic relevance of the Absalom-Tamar-Amnon relationship because they are not completely familiar with the old myths; but there are few readers --North American, at least--who will not have some kind of a reasonable grasp of the tragic story of the nineteenth-century South and the context within which it is placed.

Faulkner's characters in Absalom, Absalom! are much more specifically interwoven with the myth of the South than they are with the other myths that we have examined. Sutpen, for example, is described by Mr. Compson as the "biggest single landowner and cotton-planter in the county" (AA,72), whose wife "moved, lived, from attitude to attitude against her background of chatelaine to the largest, wife to the wealthiest, mother of the most fortunate" (AA,69), while he "acted his role too--a role of arrogant ease and leisure which, as the leisure and ease put flesh on him, became a little pompous" (AA,72). And though the Civil War brings him to ruin as a landowner and he begets sons who destroy him, Sutpen, in Quentin's imaginative reconstruction, does not abandon his dream of establishing a dynasty:

*. . . the three of them, the two daughters  
negro and white and the aunt twelve miles  
away watching from her distance as the two  
daughters watched from theirs the old demon,  
the ancient varicose and despairing Faustus*





*fling his final main now with the Creditor's hand already on his shoulder, running his little country store now for his bread and meat, haggling tediously over nickels and dimes with rapacious and poverty-stricken whites and negroes, who at one time could have galloped for ten miles in any direction without crossing his own boundary, using out of his meager stock the cheap ribbons and beads and the stale violently-colored candy with which even an old man can seduce a fifteen-year-old country girl . . . (AA,182-183)*

Yet despite the seedy and penurious level to which he is reduced, Sutpen does not repudiate the tradition of the South. When Milly fails to produce the male offspring which is his remaining goal in life, he casts her off as something lower than his favorite mare: "'Well Milly; too bad you're not a mare too. Then I could give you a decent stall in the stable' and turned and went out" (AA,286).

In repudiating Milly, as Vickery points out:

*. . . he once more rejects the claims of a wife and child because they do not conform to his pattern. The fact that Milly is the granddaughter of his own retainer, that she is probably both ignorant and inelegant, shows the extent to which Sutpen has been forced to compromise. But he still holds firm to the central core of his design--the male heir who will possess and perpetuate his name and property through all time. 11*

But Sutpen's most direct link with the South is his attitude toward miscegenation. He discards his first wife because he discovers that she may be tainted with Negro



blood: "a fact which I did not learn until after my son was born. And even then I did not act hastily . . . I merely explained how this new fact rendered it impossible that this woman and child be incorporated in my design" (AA,264). And his attempt to found a dynasty is doomed because he, like the South whose moral code he has adopted, is unable to accept a black man as son and heir.

So in spite of the irony of the origins of Sutpen's relationship with the South, there is little question that he and the heroes of the Southern myth have much in common. They too exhibit Sutpen's peculiar kind of innocence about the nature of reality; they too are captive to the vision of their own destiny; like Sutpen, they act inhumanly because of a moral blindness resulting from a total preoccupation with the implementation of a "design"; and they ultimately are destroyed because of this fatal preoccupation, their vision of a dynasty reduced to "*the ruined, the four years' fallow and neglected land*" (AA,161).

The personal tragedy of Charles Bon, as we have seen, is at least partially obscured in order to illustrate the more universal tragedy of one whose skin is black attempting to cross the color barrier. He is denied the fundamental human right to be recognized as a son or the right to have freedom of choice in marriage because his veins may



carry Negro blood. And given the circumstances in which Bon is placed, we might expect that his search would be for racial identity. But his search is the ageless quest for a father, the need to be recognized by a father no matter how demeaning the circumstances. Thus Faulkner is able to "transcend the blinding passions of place, time, and ethos, and even of . . . [his] own prejudices",<sup>12</sup> and elevate Bon to a position of universality that is a part of the tragic vision that the artist is projecting.

The analogy between Henry Sutpen and the myth of the South appears to be relatively clear-cut. His resolution to kill Bon is a result of his inability to renounce the tradition of the South and to accept as a brother-in-law a man who is part Negro. Henry is able to accept the possibility of an incestuous relationship but he cannot condone the fact of miscegenation. And the act of his fratricide can be seen as an act that is analogous to the fratricide of the Civil War; and the doom and destruction that Henry precipitates is symbolic of the devastation wrought by that catastrophic event.

Thus within the context of our discussion, one of the most important functions of the myth of the South in Absalom, Absalom! is to deal with the characters' motivations and their attitudes toward Negro-White marriages. The world





which Faulkner creates in the novel is centered around a tradition of indisputable and unabashed racism; and in their attitudes toward the problem of miscegenation all the characters in the work, including Quentin and Shreve, reflect the views of the culture from which they spring. Yet as Seiden perceptively observes, the racist myth in Absalom, Absalom! is in a complex way a "smokescreen" or a "red herring". He suggests that:

. . . it is not miscegenation but the fear of miscegenation, not the thing itself but its chimerical, hallucinatory force that Faulkner is dealing with. The novel is not concerned with the tragedy of miscegenation, but with the Miscegenation Complex; it mines one of the most powerful and corrosive figments of the white imagination: the elemental dread of the idea of the black man.<sup>13</sup>

In the light of this comment, it becomes apparent that with his use of the myth of the South Faulkner is not dealing with the question of race per se; he is attempting to come to grips with the problem of what motivates man to act as he does, what impulses, fears, and beliefs lead him to create the tragic and catastrophic situations which are as recurring and timeless as history itself.

Thus in his use of mythical allusion and allegory, be it classical, biblical, or that of the South, Faulkner is not employing the Sutpen legend as a device to teach history, as a way of determining historical truth, or just as



a way of retelling old tales. Absalom, Absalom!, ultimately, is not concerned with the analogical accuracy of myths, their historical uniqueness, or their preoccupation with incest, dynasties, or racial prejudices. It is concerned with the insight that the use of myth provides into the motivations of the characters, the respective narrators, and, we might add, the beholder himself.

Calvin S. Brown<sup>14</sup> contends that Faulkner attains universality despite his writing in a setting that is intensely local. But, in Brown's view, the universality is not achieved by parodying or creating analogies to myths which have already acquired a universal significance-- "Faulkner's parallels to the myths are not the cause of his universality, but its result."<sup>15</sup> This critic suggests that a "true myth" is a story "that somehow embodies basic human problems, attitudes, and beliefs. Historical truth is of no importance whatsoever here: it is moral truth that is required."<sup>16</sup> And while the latter statement is a shrewd comment on the nature of myth, Brown's contention that Faulkner's universality does not arise from the parallels to the myths that he uses, but that the parallels arise as a result of the universality, establishes a position which is much more difficult to defend, if indeed it is defensible at all.



In our reading of Absalom, Absalom!, there appears to be little question that Faulkner deliberately sets out to evoke some of the Greek myths in the novel, that he creates direct analogies with the story of David, and that the Sutpen story is clearly intended to be interwoven with the myth of the South. Through this structuring--with the attempts to establish a dynasty, and the resultant agonies of incest, miscegenation, fratricide, and blind guilt--the Greek, the Biblical, and the Southern myths are blended with the tale of Sutpen until they form a single myth; and this myth becomes one which evokes our tragic sense of life and helps us to comprehend the vision of the mystery and tragedy of human existence that the author is projecting.

The Sutpen legend comes to be beyond any one man or self as it achieves a universal significance because Faulkner, in a sense, is using myths as Aristotle prescribed that they should be used. But Faulkner's use is much more complex than simply re-presenting a traditional old story filtered through the perceptions and personality of the tragedian. By combining a number of myths to create one new myth, he arouses the tragic feelings that are implicit in each of the old myths; and the new myth takes on an aura that is a product of these tragic feelings compounded





together, one that embodies a tragic sense of the "basic human problems, attitudes, and beliefs." And by combining these old myths he creates one that gives the impression of familiarity, a universal myth in which the past is present and the present is past. Faulkner, moreover, not only presents the various myths and their final compound as filtered through his own perceptions and personality, they are, as we shall see in the next chapter, filtered through the perceptions and personalities of the characters, the several narrators, and ultimately through those of the reader as we ourselves attempt to create the final truth of the Sutpen story.



## CHAPTER IV

### PLOT AND NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Throughout the Poetics there is a sustained insistence on the vital importance of plot in the writing of tragedy. In Chapter VI, as we have seen, Aristotle comments that plot "is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy: Character holds the second place" (PO,63). In the succeeding chapters he goes on to elaborate on this basic premise and to delineate exactly what he conceives of as the best use of plot in tragic works. But before we can examine in detail the theory that Aristotle presents in regards to plot usage, it is obviously essential that we arrive at an understanding of just what he means by "plot" and the intricacies of its relationship with character.

Shortly before he makes his pronouncement on the importance of plot, Aristotle defines plot as "the imitation of the action . . . the arrangement of the incidents" (PO,62). But we must hold the distinction between "plot" and "story" firmly in mind if we are to grasp the meaning of his definition. The plot is not the story, it is something



that the poet "makes"--the way in which he arranges the incidents which make up the story.<sup>1</sup> It does not appear to be particularly important, in Aristotle's frame of reference, that the tragedian create the story; indeed, as we have seen in our discussion of myth, the best tragedies are often created from a story which may have existed for centuries. The tragedian can obviously arrange the incidents in a story in a variety of ways. Sophocles, for example, could have arranged the incidents in King Oedipus in a chronological sequence but he chooses to begin the play with the plague in Thebes, an event which is very close to the end of the sequence. Sophocles' play is not a mere recital of the events leading to the discovery and punishment of Oedipus, the plot, the arrangement of incidents, is so devised that the "play's process is the process of the discovery; its end, the punishment."<sup>2</sup> And by using different arrangements of the incidents of a story--omissions, distortions of chronology, the use of messengers, and so forth--the dramatist can produce a great variety of plots from the same story. Out of the multitude of events that make up a story, the author can select those which have a certain unity and arrange them in a fashion which suits his own particular purposes. The plot that the "maker" devises, in Aristotle's view, illuminates





and focuses attention on the character motivations which precipitate the events or deeds. Character, "that in virtue of which we ascribe certain qualities to the agents" (PO,62), is a moral predisposition; plot is the arrangement of incidents designed to illustrate and illuminate the moral predisposition that is inherent in the quality of the characters. For Aristotle, plot is ultimately the means by which the tragedian imposes his own particular "imitation of an action" upon a given story.

Aristotle contends that plot in tragedy is of greater importance than character; indeed, he believes that it is not absolutely necessary to be concerned with characterization in tragedy because an ideal plot is capable of arousing the interaction of pity and fear in the beholder without being dependent upon the portrayal of character:

. . . most important of all is the structure of the incidents. For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. Now character determines men's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character: character comes in as subsidiary to the actions. Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all. Again, without action there cannot be a tragedy; there may be without character. (PO,62-63)

We have already seen that by "action" Aristotle does not merely mean an "activity", he conceives of action as a



process which:

. . . embraces not only the deeds, the incidents, the situations, but also the mental processes, and the motives which underlie the outward events or which result from them. It is the compendious expression for all these forces working together towards a definite end.<sup>3</sup>

If we conceive of action in this sense it is obvious that a play or novel without action would be a play or novel in which nothing happens: the beginning and the ending would be identical. The plot is designed to provide a sequence of events which illustrate the process, the "action" which is taking place in the tragedy. Character, which is a static concept, may be added to a tragedy to achieve superior results, but it is not mandatory to do so. And the implication may be that no amount of psychological ingenuity in the representation of the qualities of character has any value unless it is combined with plot.

Aristotle goes on to illustrate the importance of plot as opposed to character by pointing out that: "The tragedies of most of our modern poets fail in the rendering of character" (PO,63). But while his meaning is rather obscure at this point, it seems that he does not consider that the "modern poets" write tragedies that are characterless. Humphrey House argues that by identifying "tragedies without character", Aristotle is discussing:



. . . plays in which personages go through a change of fortune (probably a change from happiness to misery, rather than the opposite) in which they suffer and act, but act without showing why, without adequately revealing the habit, bent and tendency of their characters, and without showing their characters in act, without showing their minds working upon the means to the actualisation of their desires. A tragedy of circumstance and event of this kind is probably capable of rousing the emotions of the audience; by self-projection into the cipher on the stage some kind of pity may be felt, and external circumstances alone may cause a kind of fear. Thus such plays are at least better than plays deficient in action; where there is nothing but a set of speeches describing static qualities.<sup>4</sup>

But the important point that Aristotle makes, as House makes clear, is that while it is possible to produce tragedy that is deficient in characterization, this type of tragedy is inferior to that which effectively combines plot and character.

In Chapter VII of the Poetics Aristotle insists that the plot must be "complete" or "whole" and of a "certain magnitude" (PO,65). He attempts to clarify "completeness" or "wholeness" by decreeing that:

A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it. (PO,65)







Since these definitions are obviously extremely abstract, we must attempt to overcome the difficulties which they present. How, for example, can a beginning not be causally connected with what has preceded it? In what sense does a particular incident mark a "beginning" or an "end"? In Chapter XIII, Aristotle amplifies the concept by suggesting that in epic:

. . . the plot manifestly ought, as in a tragedy, to be constructed on dramatic principles. It should have for its subject a single action, whole and complete, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. (PO,105)

And the key concept here is that of plot having as its subject "a single action". What Aristotle seems to be suggesting by "beginning" and "end" is that the action of a plot should not carry us back in thought to all that has happened before the plot commences, nor should it leave us in a state where we can envisage a continuing and endless chain of cause and effect events resulting from this single action. In other words, the beginning marks the initiating incident in the particular sequence of events of the "single action", and the end is the final incident in the plot which can be considered as being without further consequence--as related to this particular action. Butcher sums up the matter of Aristotle's "beginning" and "end" by pointing out that:



A play must begin at some definite point, and at some definite point it must end. It is for the poet to see that the action is complete in itself, and that neither the beginning nor the end is arbitrarily chosen. Within the dramatic action, a strict sequence of cause and effect is prescribed; but the causal chain must not be indefinitely extended outwards.<sup>5</sup>

The concept of "middle", of course, is much easier to conceive than those of beginning and end. The "middle", very simply, is all the events which occur between the first incident and the last incident and are causally related to them: "the 'middle' unlike the 'beginning' stands in causal relation to what goes before, and unlike the 'end' is causally connected with what follows."<sup>6</sup>

When Aristotle speaks of a plot having a "certain magnitude" he first of all means one that:

. . . is comprised within such limits that the sequence of events, according to the law of probability or necessity, will admit of a change from bad fortune to good, or from good fortune to bad. (PO,66)

Thus Aristotle is not discussing "magnitude" of plot in the sense of "importance" or in the sense of dealing with characters of an elevated status, he is concerned with the physical length of the work. House comments that while Aristotle lays down no "rigid dogma" about the length of tragic works, the consideration of their length is governed by two criteria:



The first criterion is the function of a tragedy itself; it must be of such a size that it can adequately display "the hero passing by a series of probable or necessary stages from misfortune to happiness, or from happiness to misfortune." . . . The second criterion is the capacity of the spectator or reader; the play must not exceed the length that can be compassed by the human memory; otherwise the essential unity of impression will be lost.<sup>7</sup>

Thus a tragic work must be long enough to allow the catastrophe to occur, yet it must not be so long that the viewer or reader cannot grasp it as a single artistic whole. But Aristotle also considers that the length of a tragic work should be as great as possible, short of the beholder being unable to hold the events in his mind at one time: "the greater the length, the more beautiful will the piece be by reason of its size, provided that the whole be perspicuous" (PO,66).

Closely tied to the concept of "wholeness" and "magnitude" is Aristotle's concept of unity of plot. He begins Chapter VIII of the Poetics by rejecting the idea that just because a number of events occur in the life of one man, they make up a single action:

Unity of plot does not, as some persons think, consist in the unity of the hero. For infinitely various are the incidents in one man's life which cannot be reduced to unity; and so, too, there are many actions of one man out of which we cannot make one action. (PO,67)

Obviously, it is possible that many changes from bad for-





tune to good fortune or from good fortune to bad fortune may occur in the life of a single man; or indeed it is possible that a change from good to bad may occur simultaneously with a change from bad to good. A man, for example, might lose a loved one--wife or child, while at the same time he might gain great recognition for his achievements in battle, as an artist, scientist, or as a ruler. By unity of plot, Aristotle seems to mean that there must be a logical connection and causation between the sequence of events. But at the end of Chapter VIII he comments that:

. . . the plot, being an imitation of an action, must imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed. (PO,67)

Now he has added an important corollary to the concept of the unity of plot; if the plot structure is such that certain "parts" of the "single action" may be removed without disjointing or disturbing the whole, it is obviously not a unified plot.<sup>8</sup> The structure must have a harmonious and necessary interaction of parts which can be grasped as an artistic whole. Perhaps one of the best treatments of Aristotle's concept of unity of plot is that of Butcher:

. . . unity--he would say--is manifested mainly in two ways. First, in the causal connexion that binds together the several parts of a play,--the thoughts, the emotions,



the decisions of the will, the external events being inextricably interwoven. Secondly, in the fact that the whole series of events, with all the moral forces that are brought into collision, are directed to a single end. The action as it advances converges on a definite point. The thread of purpose running through it becomes more marked. All minor effects are subordinated to the sense of an ever-growing unity. The end is linked to the beginning with inevitable certainty, and in the end we discern the meaning of the whole . . . In this powerful and concentrated impression lies the supreme test of unity.<sup>9</sup>

Finally--although we have not dealt with such concerns as the so-called "unities" of time and place and the use of episodes or "quantitative parts"--there is the matter of Aristotle's view of plot complexity. He considers a complex plot, one in which there is a change of fortune accompanied by a "Reversal of the Situation . . . or by Recognition, or by both" (PO,71), to be superior to a "simple" plot which does not include these elements. Thus a complex plot is characterized by a movement that abruptly changes direction but it is not, as we might expect with the modern connotation of "complex", one that has two concurrent actions: "A well-constructed plot should . . . be single in its issue, rather than double as some maintain" (PO76). Double plots, says Aristotle, are designed only to please the wishes of the audience and "The pleasure, however, thence derived is not the true tragic pleasure" (PO,77).



If we were to judge Absalom, Absalom! as a tragic work of art on the basis of Aristotle's concept of the importance of plot, the novel, at first glance, would fail rather miserably. When we first encounter the work, the initial impression is one of a plot structure that is totally chaotic. The complexities of the use of the conflicting points of view of several narrators which are often based upon conjecture or fabrication, the portrayal of a protagonist who never appears in the story, the confusion of the distorted chronology, and the difficulty of distinguishing between narrative voices, all give the impression that not only the reader but also the author is experiencing difficulty in creating some kind of order out of the confusion. Yet if we systematically examine Absalom, Absalom! in order to delineate the plot structure, we discover that there is a unity of purpose and a narrative method which are not only complex but also effective. But how does Faulkner's methodology in designing plot differ from, or agree with, the precepts that Aristotle lays down in the Poetics?

If we consider the plot of Absalom, Absalom! to consist only of the sequence of events in the life of Thomas Sutpen, we must concede that it meets Aristotle's criteria for being "complete" or "whole" and of a "certain mag-





nitude" reasonably well. Obviously the Sutpen story has a beginning, a middle, and an end, although it can be argued that the causal chain extends beyond the end. There is a certain magnitude to the story which allows the requisite change of fortune to take place and the reader to hold the events in his mind at one time. The plot of the Sutpen story appears to be "unified", once the reader has discovered all the events in the story; the sequence of events is designed to illustrate the single action of Thomas Sutpen's rise and fall and there is obviously a causal connection between the events in this rise and fall. The plot is "complex" in the sense that there is a reversal of situation, although not recognition, and the Sutpen legend itself does not have the "double thread" of plot.

But the plot of the novel, of course, is far more complex than the chain of events in the Stupen story. The ultimate meaning of the work cannot possibly be revealed by merely examining the sequence of events in the Sutpen saga and the causal relationships that exist within this framework. When we consider the whole of the novel, Absalom, Absalom! appears to have no real "beginning" or "end" because the causal connections continue to move outward ad infinitum. And the causal connections between the various narrative sections in the "middle" often defy det-



ection until long after they have occurred, if indeed they are detected at all. The novel is so complex and dense that it virtually defies any logical point of entrance. Joseph W. Reed maintains that:

The problem of discussing Absalom, Absalom! is a problem of where to start. . . . It is a much of a muchness, too much book for its length. It continually goes too far, throws the reader back upon his own control and order to try to resolve its paradoxes poetically. Sutpen's design in its final failure becomes simply inflexible and pathetic like Ike McCaslin's or Addie Bundren's; but at the outset and for most of the book it is simply too big for his imagination or ours to take in.<sup>10</sup>

If Reed's assessment is correct--and few readers would disagree with his comment that the book is too big for the imagination to take in--Faulkner is violating Aristotle's dictum that the magnitude of a tragic work must be such that the beholder can view it as a single artistic whole. It is extremely difficult for most readers to hold all the events and meanings of Absalom, Absalom! in mind at one time.

It is possible to argue that Absalom, Absalom! has unity of plot in the Aristotelean sense on the basis of Butcher's comment, in the passage we quoted, that the "whole series of events" is "directed to a single end", and that "in the end we discern the meaning of the whole". But this is a very difficult argument to sustain in the



light of the complexities of this work. Most of us would be extremely reluctant to proclaim, after any number of readings of the novel, that we completely and unequivocally understand what Absalom, Absalom! is designed to mean. And certainly, as even a superficial examination of critical commentaries indicates, it is virtually impossible to obtain any consensus of opinion amongst individual readers as to what the "meaning of the whole" of the work may be.<sup>11</sup>

But Absalom, Absalom! also lacks unity in the Aristotelean sense because the "causal connexion" between the "several parts" of the work is, in many cases, exceedingly remote. In the various narrative sections, any type of connection, causal or otherwise, is often difficult to establish because there is virtually no sequence of events occurring. We have page after page of speculation about the Sutpen story often based upon biased opinion, half-truths, conjecture, and outright fabrication. And the novel adopts Aristotle's dreaded "double plot" because the portrayal of the points of view of Rosa, Mr. Compson, and Quentin and Shreve not only elaborates upon the Sutpen myth but the narratives themselves tend to become stories within a story, or as in the case of Quentin and Shreve, a tragedy within a tragedy. In the latter case in particular the Sut-





pen story tends to recede into the background and the motivations, perceptions, and reactions of the narrators take precedence.

One of the serious problems in discussing the plot of Absalom, Absalom! is the one of deciding just what the novel is about. There appears to be two distinct conceptions of the novel; one conception is primarily concerned with the narrators, their perceptions and speculations, and the subjective quality of the "truth" which they ultimately derive;<sup>12</sup> the other conception is chiefly concerned with the Sutpen story and the psychological motivations and sociological implications connected with his actions.<sup>13</sup> Ruppersburg<sup>14</sup> sums up the matter rather well in his observation that interpretations of Absalom, Absalom! seem to be divided into "two schools". The interpreters who belong to the "Detective" school emphasize "the importance of character-narrators" and tend "to ignore, sometimes, the Sutpen story and focus too much on the inability of the narrators to reveal truth."<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, interpreters from the "Impressionist" school:

. . . hold that the basic outline of the Sutpen story is accurately presented in the narrative, that minor discrepancies in fact and opinion are the understandable result of contrasting narrator personalities, or even of the author's carelessness. The Impressionists grant less importance to the narrators' involvement in the story than to Sutpen and his family.<sup>16</sup>



But there does not seem to be any valid reason why a "middle of the road" approach cannot be taken which incorporates both of the conceptions. In our reading of Absalom, Absalom!, both points of view are valid; there is no question that the novel is concerned with an attempt to discover the "truth" about the events in the Sutpen myth, but it is also concerned with the motivations and perceptions of the narrators as they seek to interpret the meaning of the story. In her excellent assessment of the novel, Olga Vickery maintains that Absalom, Absalom! is concerned with the creation of truth as well as with its revelation:

The relation of the narrators to the center . . . points out the essential ambiguity of fact and the multiplicity of "subjective" truths to which it [the theme] can give rise. . . . with successive generations the diverse versions coalesce, the inconsistencies are ironed out, and the legend assumes an independent existence. The legend, in its turn, becomes a motivating factor for those individuals who inherit it. Once the contributions of individual narrators, their deductions, speculations, and inventions, are forgotten, the legend, which embodies a poetic truth, tends once more to become identified with fact. Accordingly, it becomes a motivating force for those who inherit it. <sup>17</sup>

But if we accept the intermediate position that Absalom, Absalom! is concerned with revealing the perceptions, speculations, and motivations of the narrators as well as revealing the truth inherent in the Sutpen story, and if we accept the fact that the plot of the novel bears little



resemblance to Aristotle's precepts in regard to plot usage, what kind of plot structure is Faulkner using to "imitate the action" of the two themes, to arouse our tragic sense of life, and to allow us to understand more fully his tragic vision?

Even though Absalom, Absalom! is difficult to penetrate, the careful reader is able to assemble the basic outline and the general direction of movement of the Sutpen story relatively early in the novel. Once the essential events in the story have been exposed, Faulkner begins to build upon this base with a plot structure which might best be described as one with an inverted spiral form. He employs, in Longley's words:

. . . the technique of covering again and again the important point or cruxes of the work but always at higher and higher levels of understanding. . . . In Absalom, Absalom! the spiral is like an inverted cone, which with every recrossing or recounting of an event goes ever wider and wider into implication and expansion.<sup>18</sup>

And in Absalom, Absalom! the building up of the successive layers of perceptions and meanings of the spiral structure is primarily accomplished by the use of contrasting and conflicting narrative points of view. But the novel becomes extremely difficult at times not only because of the myriad of perspectives, but because the presentation of the several narrative points of view is not





clearly delineated into specific books, sections, or chapters: "In mid-sentence the viewpoint may shift from the spoken dialogue of Shreve to the interior monologue of Quentin or to objective reality."<sup>19</sup> While this indifference to conventional narrative methods may be startling and highly frustrating to some, Faulkner does not appear to be deliberately trying to confuse the reader; he is using a spiral plot structure and an unconventional narrative technique as devices to help create a specific effect upon the reader:

Absalom, Absalom! continues Faulkner's attempt to make technique and structure focus the meaning of the novel. It is most closely linked to The Sound and the Fury whose structure it elaborates and enriches. Like Caddy Compson, Thomas Sutpen is never presented directly, and like her, he becomes a tremendously vital as well as an enigmatic figure by being the object of intense concern for a number of characters. The difference, and it is a large one, is that Sutpen, unlike Caddy, provides a dynamic rather than a static center. The perspectives are no longer self-contained and self-illuminating; as a result, we have a kaleidoscope instead of a juxtaposition of views. Each successive account of Sutpen is constantly being merged with its predecessors. At every moment, there falls into place yet another pattern which disavows some parts of the earlier interpretations but never discards them. . . . This means that our final picture of Sutpen results from a fusion of at least three accounts, each of which belongs to a different generation and reflects a different personal bias.<sup>20</sup>

But regardless of whether or not we ultimately conclude that Faulkner's ingenious experiment is successful, the mechanism and implications of the spiral plot structure



are obviously worthy of closer examination.

If Absalom, Absalom! can be said to have any real organizing principle, it is undoubtedly the technique of using several narrative points of view to recapitulate and speculate upon the implications of the Sutpen story. Each of the four narrative voices is essentially "imitating the action" of the Sutpen myth, and the attendant myths that are woven into it, in an attempt to find the truth that is inherent within. Each narrator eventually creates his own "truth", and from these several truths the reader in turn is forced to create his own. In the Aristotelean sense, we have four different "plots" within the novel because the narrators are taking the Sutpen myth--which, as we have seen, comes to be a compound of several myths--and creating a new version of the story as filtered through their own perceptions and personalities. And the intricate layering effect of the spiral structure becomes apparent when we consider that the successive narrators not only create their own truth about the Sutpen myth, as based upon the "facts" that they have available to them, but that, as we have seen, they also have access to their predecessors' interpretations and can thus add other insights and biases to their own. The tragedy that is finally experienced by the reader is a kind of cooper-



ative construct; we are not exposed to one authorial "imitation of an action", as Aristotle would have it, but several. And furthermore, we cannot take any of these points of view at face value since each one is only a limited part of the whole and since each may be based upon the interpretation of others, half-truths, conjecture, or outright fabrication. Faulkner does not clearly delineate his own "imitation of an action"; he presents it in fragmented form and we ultimately must create our own.

But Faulkner, of course, has not selected the narrators at random, nor has he presented their versions of the Sutpen legend in a totally haphazard fashion. The narrators are in fact carefully chosen to "weigh, judge, and interpret the Sutpen legend from a different perspective, determined by the observer's own particular generation and his personal relationship to the southern myth or to Colonel Sutpen".<sup>21</sup> The story unfolds as a series of intricately interwoven responses to the sense of bafflement and incredulity which accompanies the Sutpen story. Together the narrators re-create from, in Mr. Compson's words, "a few old mouth-to-mouth tales", a story of dimly seen people: "men and women who once lived and breathed" and "in whose living blood and seed we ourselves lay dormant and waiting" (AA,100-101).





Miss Rosa is obviously chosen because she is a first-hand observer and a participant in many of the events in the Sutpen story. And it is through her narrative that the reader first comes into any intimate contact with these events. She lays the foundation upon which the other narrators build even though her version of the legend is hysterically distorted and inadequate in her inability to make any sense out of the story. Since she is unable to link Sutpen's activities to what she considers any rational or predictable human behavior, she insists that he is a superhuman and demonic figure:

. . . and he, fiend blackguard and devil, in Virginia fighting, where the chances of the earth's being rid of him were the best anywhere under the sun, yet Ellen and I both knowing that he would return, that every man in our armies would have to fall before bullet or ball found him . . . a man who rode into town out of nowhere with a horse and two pistols and a herd of wild beasts that he had hunted down single-handed because he was stronger in fear than even they were in whatever heathen place he had fled from, and the French architect who looked like he had been hunted down and caught in turn by the negroes--a man who fled here and hid, concealed himself behind respectability, behind that hundred miles of land which he took from a tribe of ignorant Indians, nobody knows how, and a house the size of a courthouse where he lived for three years without a window or door or bedstead in it and still called it Sutpen's Hundred as if it had been a king's grant in unbroken perpetuity from his great grandfather . . .  
(AA, 15-16)

A number of critics<sup>22</sup> see Miss Rosa's narrative as being a sort of Gothic mystery in which she lives a nightmare



inhabited by ghostly figures and in particular by the demon Sutpen. And certainly Faulkner uses the dark, mysterious, and brooding atmosphere of her melodramatic narrative to help create a sense of the doom and fatality which arises from social sin and moral damnation.

Yet Miss Rosa's inability to understand the Sutpen story--and the resultant demonic and nightmarish quality for her--is not only a product of the incomprehensibility of the story, it is, in part, a result of her own psychological bias:

Rosa's understanding of the story . . . is inseparable from her feeling of outrage. She occasionally asserts that Sutpen's goal was "respectability" . . . and at another moment she is sure that he is driven by "ruthless pride" and a "lust for vain magnificence" . . . These characterizations of Sutpen may be seen to depend upon Rosa's more personal concerns, upon her response to what may have been a proposal of a trial copulation. They depend upon her view of herself as the image of respectability which Sutpen, in her terms, constantly offended and finally outraged.<sup>23</sup>

Thus Miss Rosa's narrative not only provides one perspective and one set of perceptions through which the Sutpen myth is filtered, it also provides an examination of the motivations and actions of the narrator herself.

But there is more to Faulkner's method than the depiction of a narrative voice that is unable to understand the truth of the Sutpen myth or that is unable to come to





grips with it because of the neurotic self-absorption and moral outrage of a sexually frustrated old maid. She is a figure who is designed to draw the reader into her narrative as she struggles desperately to arrive at some understanding of the truth and meaning of the Sutpen story:

*If he was mad, it was only his compelling dream which was insane and not his methods: it was no madman who bargained and cajoled hard manual labor out of men like Jones; it was no madman who kept clear of the sheets and hoods and night-galloping horses with which men who were once his acquaintances even if not his friends discharged the canker suppuration of defeat; it was no madman's plan or tactics which gained him at the lowest possible price the sole woman available to wive him, and by the one device which could have gained his point . . . But no matter. I will tell you what he did and let you be the judge. (Or try to tell you, because there are some things for which three words are three too many, and three thousand words that many words too less, and this is one of them. It can be told; I could take that many sentences, repeat the bold blank naked and outrageous words just as he spoke them, and bequeath you only that same aghast and outraged unbelief I knew when I comprehended what he meant; or take three thousand sentences and leave you only that Why? Why? and Why? that I have asked and listened to for almost fifty years.) But I will let you be the judge and let you tell me if I was not right. (AA, 166-167)*

Thus we are led not only to assess Miss Rosa's psychological biases and motivations, but we arrive at the beginnings of our own attempts to create the truth of a myth which has been filtered through her perceptions and personality.

Even though Rosa is incapable of extracting the "truth"





from the Sutpen legend, of establishing a rational motivation for his actions, or of arriving at an understanding which will allow her to give Sutpen human proportions, her narrative tends to gain credibility with us as it progresses because of the fact that she is a participant in the story. In spite of the obvious limitations and the hysterical distortions of her point of view, her narrative is of prime importance in the plot structure. Rosa's immediacy to the events in the legend, her continued involvement in the years following his death, the consistency of her narrative, all allow our initial penetration into Absalom, Absalom! and force the beginnings of our own imaginative "imitation of an action".

The apparent objectivity and scepticism of the sections narrated by Mr. Compson are in direct contrast to Rosa's hysterical outpourings. Unlike Rosa, he is never directly involved in the events in the Sutpen story and thus is placed at a greater distance from them not only in time but in space. His account presents an apparent broader perspective of the Sutpen myth than Rosa's--and adds to the layering effect of the plot structure--not only because he is placed at a greater distance from the protagonists but because:

His age, experience, and temperament make him more aware of the characters in relation to



society and time. . . . it is Mr. Compson who describes the interaction of Sutpen and Jefferson. He shows the town's curiosity, suspicion, indignation, and finally, its slow and unwilling acceptance of Sutpen. . . . His account of Sutpen's courtship and wedding reveals the "intruder" in a better light than the town which seeks to reject him.<sup>24</sup>

But the appearance of a calm, considered, and informed reasonableness in Mr. Compson's narrative is deceptive since some of his conclusions are based upon conjecture. He makes use of conjectural narration when he assumes that "Bon must have learned of Sutpen's visit to New Orleans as soon as he (Bon) reached home that first summer. He must have known that Sutpen now knew his secret [Bon's "marriage" to the octoroon woman]" (AA,92). But one of the most interesting examples of conjecture in Mr. Compson's narrative is his attempt to explain Henry's opposition to the marriage of Bon and Judith. Because he is not aware that Thomas Sutpen is Charles Bon's father or that Bon's mother has been cast aside by Sutpen because she may be part Negro--in other words, because Mr. Compson is unaware of the problems of incest and miscegenation, he hypothesizes that Henry's objection to Bon's marriage with Judith is the fact that Bon has gone through the "meaningless" ceremony with the octoroon:

Henry waited four years, holding the three of them in that abeyance, that durance, waiting, hoping, for Bon to renounce the woman and dis-



solve the marriage which he (Henry) admitted was no marriage, and which he must have known as soon as he saw the woman and the child that Bon would not renounce. In fact, as time passed and Henry became accustomed to the idea of that ceremony which was still no marriage, that may have been the trouble with Henry--not the two ceremonies but the two women; not the fact that Bon's intention was to commit bigamy but that it was apparently to make his (Henry's) sister a sort of junior partner in a harem. (AA, 119)

Mr. Compson, moreover, is not a rational or reliable narrator since he distorts the Sutpen story in his attempts to fit it into his concept of Greek tragedy and into the parameters of his own fatalistic philosophy. His tragic version of the Sutpen myth, as we have seen, associates the house of Sutpen with the Greek legends, and he consistently portrays Sutpen as a tragic actor playing his role while, "behind him Fate, destiny, retribution, irony--the stage manager, call him what you will --was already striking the set and dragging on the synthetic and spurious shadows and shapes of the next one" (AA, 72-73). Thus Mr. Compson denies his hero humanity by insisting that Sutpen's life fits into a pattern of fatality in which Fate and Destiny, rather than individual choice, are the controlling forces.

Yet despite the ultimate inadequacies of his knowledge and his lack of reliability as a narrator, in spite of the fact that he is more concerned with the application







of his own fatalistic philosophy than he is with any attempt to grasp the human quality in the form and meaning of the Sutpen myth, there is no question that Mr. Compson's narrative is vitally important. His point of view tends to counteract the hysteria of Miss Rosa's, his sense of the tragic undoubtedly helps evoke our own, but the most important function of his narrative is the role that it plays in the plot structure. With the addition of more material and another point of view our perception of the Sutpen story is enhanced as the layering effect of the spiral structure continues. And the incorporation of Mr. Compson's perspective into the structure continues the preparation of the reader for the agonizing search for truth that we find in the narratives of Quentin and Shreve.

By this time we have come to the realization that neither Rosa nor Mr. Compson is capable of discerning the truth in the Sutpen saga and that despite their attempts to grasp its meaning they cannot succeed. But as we struggle in our own minds and imaginings to come to understand the legend, we continue to expect that the narrator(s), as in many novels, will eventually come to our rescue. And as the inverted spiral structure continues to move upward and outward we expect narrative voices that not only have greater objectivity because of the greater distance from the



events but ones that also are capable of more flexibility as the search for truth and meaning intensifies.

But as the narrative shifts to Quentin and Shreve, they in turn are unable to provide an ultimate solution to the problem of the meaning of the Sutpen myth. And the movement is not in the direction of greater objectivity as a product of increasing distance from the events in the Sutpen legend; the movement is toward a subjective reconstruction of events which becomes more and more imaginative and increasingly based on intuition, half-truths, conjecture, and fabrication. Moreover, the events in the life of Thomas Sutpen tend to become less important and the center of interest, as we have seen, tends to shift somewhat from the character of Sutpen to the complexities of the Judith-Henry-Bon relationship and increasingly to the perceptions and motivations of the narrators themselves.

Quentin Compson is obviously the focal character amongst the several narrators; although he shares the labor of interpretation with the others, he alone is in a position to link the interpreters and to interlace their interpretations.<sup>25</sup> But perhaps the most interesting relationship between the different narrators is that between Quentin and Shreve. In the second half of Absalom, Absalom! we see an imaginative process in which



Shreve assists Quentin in an attempt to impose some kind of coherence and unity on the mass of distorted and undigested information which has been received from other sources, and in particular from the other narrators. It is in the precisely-attuned imaginations of the youthful narrators that the outer circle of the plot structure forms and the final attempt at reconstruction of the Sutpen myth takes place.

The attempt at reconstruction is precipitated by the letter which Quentin receives from his father announcing the death of Miss Rosa. The information which Shreve elicits from Quentin that she was "neither aunt, cousin, nor uncle, Rosa. Miss Rosa Coldfield, an old lady that died young of outrage", leads to the questions: "You mean she was no kin to you, no kin at all . . .?", then "what did she die for?" and ultimately, "*Tell about the South. What's it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all*" (AA,174). Thus, the letter forces Quentin to "tell about the South" in the presence of a collaborator whose temperament and cultural background are in direct opposition to his own.

In the first stages of the collaboration, Shreve serves as an ironic, even cynical, initiator and guide for Quentin, as the latter begins his narrative. But as the





narrative progresses, Shreve increasingly takes the initiative and he comes to dominate and "speak" for Quentin in an attempt to create some coherence out of the materials that Quentin has gleaned from the past:

"Wait. Wait. You mean that this old gal, this Aunt Rosa--"

"Miss Rosa," Quentin said.

"All right all right.--that this old dame this Aunt Rosa--"

"Miss Rosa, I tell you."

"All right all right all right.--that this old --this Aunt R--All right all right all right all right.-- that hadn't been out there, hadn't set foot in the house even in forty-three years, yet who not only said there was somebody hidden in it but found somebody that would believe her, would drive that twelve miles out there in a buggy at midnight to see if she was right or not?" (AA,176)

At this point their roles are distinct: Shreve is a stranger to the South, an inquirer who is sceptical and emotionally detached from the events that Quentin is portraying; but Quentin, whose roots are in the myth of the South, is totally immersed in the emotional and intellectual implications of the Sutpen legend. Yet despite the contrast of their early roles, they eventually become so engrossed in the reconstruction of the Sutpen myth that they enter into a game of creation that is a joint effort of translation and interpretation:

They stared--glared--at one another. It was Shreve speaking, though save for the slight difference which the intervening degrees of latitude had inculcated in them (differences not in



tone or pitch but of turns of phrase and usage of words), it might have been either of them and was in a sense both: both thinking as one, the voice which happened to be speaking the thought only the thinking become audible, vocal; the two of them creating between them, out of the rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talking, people who perhaps had never existed at all anywhere, who, shadows, were shadows not of flesh and blood which had lived and died but shadows in turn of what were (to one of them at least, to Shreve) shades too, quiet as the visible murmur of their vaporizing breath. (AA,303)

Now their overwhelming concern is to make the Sutpen myth "work", to create an arrangement which will realize all its potential and shades of meaning. If a sequence is inconsistent, or incomprehensible, they do not hesitate to create the necessary "facts" by conjecture or fabrication. Perhaps the most obvious fabrication in the Quentin-Shreve narrative is Shreve's creation of the lawyer who represents Bon's mother, "she wouldn't worry at all: she would just have out the carriage and go to the lawyer" (AA,304), who acts as counsellor to Bon: "Then by all means let it be the law. Your mother will agree--be pleased" (AA,311-312), and who--in his attempts to gain revenge for Sutpen's first wife, while "farming" his "private mad female millionaire"--is conceived as grotesquely computing the net worth of Sutpen's family and property:

*Today Sutpen finished robbing a drunken Indian  
of a hundred miles of virgin land, val. \$25,000.  
At 2:31 today came up out of swamp with final*



*plank for house. val. in conj. with land 40,000.  
 7:52 p.m. today married. Bigamy threat val.  
 minus nil. unless quick buyer. Not probable.  
 Doubtless conjoined with wife same day. Say 1  
 year and then maybe the date and the hour too:  
 Son. Intrinsic val. possible though not prob-  
 able forced sale of house & land plus val. crop  
 minus child's one quarter. (AA,301)*

In their attempts to reconstruct the motivation for Henry's killing of Bon, Shreve imagines, with Quentin's acquiescence, that Sutpen and Henry have met and that Sutpen reveals that Bon is Henry's brother:

*"So the old man sent the nigger for Henry,"  
 Shreve said. "And Henry came in and the old  
 man said 'They cannot marry because he is your  
 brother' and Henry said 'You lie' like that,  
 that quick: no space, no interval, no nothing  
 between like when you press the button and get  
 light in the room." (AA,293)*

But when the composite narrators decide that it is not the possibility of incest that forces Henry to prevent the marriage, they insert the supposition that Sutpen also tells Henry that Bon has Negro blood:

*--He cannot marry her, Henry.  
 Now Henry speaks.  
 --You said that before. . . .  
 Yes. I have decided, Brother or not, I have  
 decided. I will. I will.  
 --He must not marry her, Henry.  
 --Yes. I said Yes at first, but I was not de-  
 cided then. I didn't let him. But now I have had  
 four years to decide in. I will. I will. I am  
 going to.  
 --He must not marry her, Henry. His mother's  
 father told me that her mother had been a Spanish  
 woman. I believed him; it was not until after he  
 was born that I found out that his mother was  
 part negro. (AA,354-355)*







Now the narrators are so involved in the events in the Sutpen myth, particularly in the Judith-Henry-Bon relationship that they, as we have seen, become participants in the story and they merge with Charles and Henry as they journey to the final, fateful confrontation:

"So that now it was not two but four of them riding the two horses . . . four of them and then just two--Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry" (AA,334). But with the shift of focus to Judith, Henry, and Bon there is not an abandonment of the central themes of the Sutpen story. In this state of composite awareness, "First, two of them, then four; now two again" (AA,345), Quentin and Shreve, as Minter points out:

. . . rehearse for us the scenes that seal Sutpen's fate. Through them we see Henry kill Bon. And through them we see what is left after Charles Bon's death is, on one side, devastation, and on the other, an expended creator.<sup>26</sup>

The perspective is broadening even more because Quentin and Shreve are not only dealing with the issues of Thomas Sutpen as a man, they are also dealing with the issues of Thomas Sutpen in relation to his family and society, and with the issues of the Greek, Biblical, and Southern myths which are woven into the Sutpen legend. But ultimately the Quentin-Shreve narrative is focused upon the perceptions and motivations of the narrators themselves, and as



the spiral continues to move outward and upward we ourselves come to provide materials in an attempt to arrive at the final meaning of the Sutpen story, the myths that permeate it, and the motivations of the narrators who present an unreality upon which we attempt to construct a reality.<sup>27</sup> And because the dramatizations that Quentin and Shreve produce are so plausible and powerful, these moments of composite awareness excite the highest level of our tragic sense of life as we ourselves become totally immersed in the imaginative search for truth and meaning.

But as the novel draws to a close Quentin and Shreve separate again. Quentin can go no further, he is unable, or unwilling, to accept or face what has happened; he is overwhelmed by the re-creation which he and Shreve have achieved and he remains obsessed with the problems of the past. But Shreve emerges from the consequences of the re-enactments and returns to his role of the flippant, cynical, and detached outsider.<sup>28</sup>

In Absalom, Absalom!, then, Faulkner's plot bears little resemblance to those precepts of plot usage that Aristotle enunciates in the Poetics. The principles of "wholeness", "unity", and "complexity" are all violated. The plot has a "double thread" in that it is not only concerned with revealing the truth of the Sutpen myth, it is also concerned with revealing the motivations and percep-



tions of the narrators themselves. In their common compulsion to arrive at the truth in the Sutpen legend, the narrators are expressing humanity's need for a meaningful and ordered existence with a beginning, a middle, and an end. And once the pattern of their narrative has emerged we never really lose sight of it: "though always shifting, always appearing in new lights, always being modified . . . [growing] steadily richer in its implications, more compelling in its power over our imaginations."<sup>29</sup>

But despite the increasing richness and depth of meaning revealed by the spiral of the plot structure as it moves through the progressive narrations of Rosa, Mr. Compson, and Quentin and Shreve, the ultimate meaning of the Sutpen myth lies beyond the confines of Absalom, Absalom!. By evoking the tragic sense of life within us, and by forcing us to "imitate the action" of the Sutpen legend within our own imaginations, Faulkner brings us to a point in which we continue to create our own tragedy and we reach an emotional state in which we are able to glimpse the poet's vision of the tragedy of mankind as we come to experience the exhilarating interaction of pity and fear in catharsis.





## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

This examination of Faulkner's use of the tragic sense of life in Absalom, Absalom! and the comparison of his tragic method with Aristotle's concept of the requirements of tragedy are, of course, incomplete. Faulkner's powerful and compelling use of language could, for example, have been examined in the light of Aristotle's principles of the use of "diction" in tragedy. A detailed investigation of Faulkner's peculiar technique of presenting an effect with the cause to be discovered or imagined later --as opposed to Aristotle's "unity" of plot--would undoubtedly be both interesting and rewarding. The specific problem of how a tragedy written in the novel form may or may not be fitted into Aristotle's complete tragic pattern is a problem that deserves to be examined in detail. Faulkner's use of interior monologue to report on the groping of human minds for truth and order may well be an important device in helping to evoke the tragic sense of life, and a device that is also worthy of close investigation. Moreover there is a wealth of material to be explored in



regards to the way in which Faulkner manipulates time to assist in creating the tragic effect. But we have seen enough of Faulkner's method to allow us to address the questions that we posed in our opening comments about Unamuno's concept of the tragic sense of life and the contrasting and much more highly structured view of tragedy that Aristotle proposes.

It is obvious by now that Faulkner is not following all of Aristotle's formulae for the writing of tragedy in Absalom, Absalom!. In some areas, the presentation of the tragic hero, for example, there are some similarities between Faulkner's method and the methods prescribed by Aristotle. In other areas, particularly in plot usage, there is virtually no similarity between the two methods. While Faulkner may give the impression at times in this novel that he is writing classical tragedy because of the various references and allegories and because he utilizes characters that consciously or unconsciously uphold some of the principles that are associated with it in their attitudes, perceptions, and remarks, there appears to be little question that he ultimately is pursuing a tragic method which does not follow a number of the mechanistic and structural principles of Aristotle such as the use of "quantitative parts", "wholeness", "magnitude", and "unity"



and "complexity" of plot. But there remains the possibility that Faulkner may have chosen to incorporate some of Aristotle's more subjective principles, particularly those that deal with the motivations and perceptions of the poet, protagonist, and beholder, into his own scheme for creating a tragic work of art.

Faulkner's tragic method in Absalom, Absalom! is, as we have seen, effective in a number of ways: his tragic heroes may not be complete in the Aristotelean sense but their combined impact upon the reader is a highly significant factor in exciting our tragic sense of life; Faulkner's use of myth is so sophisticated as to be virtually unrecognizable by Aristotle's standards, but the result is a telescoping of time that is very effectual in utilizing the possibilities of the myths that he incorporates into his work; the complexities of the inverted spiral of the plot structure of the novel prepare us for the tragic experience with the multiplicity of points of view, force us to enter into the story ourselves, and ultimately lead us into a situation in which we continue to create our own tragedy long after Faulkner's novel has ended.

But is there a more fundamental reason that many of us ultimately experience an overwhelming sense of tragedy as we read Absalom, Absalom! despite the fact that Faulkner has not implemented Aristotle's complete tragic pattern?





Is it possible that it may in part impress us as a tragic work because there is a direct connection between Unamuno's tragic sense of life and such Aristotelean principles as the cathartic interaction of pity and fear, the concept of an "imitation of an action", and the poet as a "maker"? These questions raise speculative and possibly controversial considerations that perhaps may be best approached by exploring the problem of how we identify a work as being tragic.

The issue that confronts us then is how do we know that Faulkner is writing tragedy in Absalom, Absalom!? We have seen that the novel will not meet many of Aristotle's precepts for a tragic work of art. It is possible, of course, that it may meet the criteria of other tragic theorists such as Hegel, Schopenhauer, or Nietzsche, but perhaps the real point is that tragedy ultimately cannot be defined under any precise set of rules or in the context of any specific structure. Longley suggests that the only way we can identify tragedy is by the impact that the work has upon us:

We may argue as long as we wish about the attributes of the hero and the requirements of the plot, but at the end, tragedy, in order to happen at all, must take place in the consciousness of the beholder. There may be plays upon the boards and pity and fear in human beings, but unless the pity and fear and the purgation of them are brought about by the spectacle as seen, there can be no tragedy.<sup>1</sup>



If this is the case, then it is apparent that we must have the potential to experience Unamuno's tragic sense of life in order to be able to perceive tragedy; and just as obviously, we must be confronted with a work of art which is capable of evoking our tragic sense and of linking it to the tragic sense of the poet in order that we might come to a clearer and more sympathetic understanding of his tragic vision. In this frame of reference, Unamuno's concept of the tragic sense of life is at the very root of any tragic work because it is not only prerequisite for artist and beholder to achieve and sustain this particular bent of mind, it is only when our tragic sense of life is excited to the highest pitch that we are able to experience the interaction of pity and fear in catharsis. And this, it seems, is the point at which Unamuno and Aristotle come together. We must have the tragic sense of life in order to experience the interaction of pity and fear as we create the tragedy within ourselves; no specific structural plan or specific subject matter alone can do it for us. Indeed it may be that no specific plan or shape of art is necessary in order for us to feel that we have read or seen tragic work.

But even though the ultimate determination of tragedy may be made upon the basis of the impact that the work of



art has upon the beholder, it is obviously essential that any examination of a particular tragic work be concerned, as we have been, with the means by which the "maker" produces this impact. Modern tragedy may have in common with classical tragedy, or any other tragedy, the evocation of the tragic sense of life and the ultimate interaction of pity and fear in catharsis, but the question that emerges is whether or not the means of achieving these ends have changed substantially since the time of Aristotle or whether there are still many elements that are common in all tragedy--perhaps even some elements that we have not yet isolated in the tragic art of Greece, England, and Mississippi.

One of the questions that often arises in any discussion of modern art is whether or not it is even possible to write tragedy in the context of contemporary society and in view of the perceived differences in human sensibilities between the twentieth-century and the Golden Age of Athens. It has been argued that tragedy cannot be written in the modern age because we live in a society which has been levelled to the point that individuals are characterized by a distressing uniformity:

It is not the theatre, however, but the modern world that receives criticism's first and most devastating fire. How indeed should the exalted art of tragedy, which has traditionally





dealt with the fate of singular individuals, flourish in the age of the common man? How should the grandeur of the tragic hero and the splendour of tragic vision survive in a world leveled down by democracy and cheapened by mass-production and mass-consumption, a world in which even emotions and ideas have been converted into commodities gaudily packaged for the buyer?<sup>2</sup>

In this faceless kind of a world individual man cannot achieve a coherent view of himself, exercise his capabilities for suffering and achievement, or even identify his place in the universe. As a result, he has no opportunity to take responsibility for any actions "that would make dramatic conflict humanistically relevant and calamity morally significant. There can be no tragic heroes in the bleak commonwealth of conditioned animals."<sup>3</sup>

But this point of view appears to be too sterile and too pessimistic. After all, Absalom, Absalom! is an example of a creation of this century that appears to succeed as a tragic work of art. We can of course argue that Faulkner's tragedy is not really written about a twentieth-century society of "conditioned animals" and that the events are placed to a large extent in the context of an earlier age. But this argument can also be applied to some of Shakespeare's great tragedies which are placed in an age that is obviously much earlier than the Elizabethan period and to the works of Sophocles which are, by Arist-



otle's admission, the re-creation of mythical events that supposedly occurred sometime in the distant past. When we speak of a tragedy belonging to a particular period the concern is not so much with the placing of the fictitious events in time as the placing of the work within the moral and philosophical framework of the particular age in which it is created. In this sense, there appears to be little question that it is possible to create a tragic work of art within the context of twentieth-century society. But we must be prepared to recognize that contemporary works cannot be judged solely on the basis of the forms of tragedy that have been written in the past. Some aspects of the writing of tragedy, or any other genre, are obviously subject to change as society changes and as the state of the art of creation develops or assumes a somewhat different direction. Gassner suggests that:

Tragic art is subject to evolutionary processes, and tragedy created in modern times must be modern. The fact that it will be different from tragedy written three, five, or twenty-five centuries ago does not mean that it will no longer be tragedy; it will merely be different. It will be as different from earlier tragic literature as Hamlet, let us say, is different from Oedipus Rex, or as Phaedra is different from Euripides' Hippolytus. Aristotle himself did not presume to legislate on tragedy for all time, but spoke modestly about tragic art as he knew it from the works of a handful of Athenian playwrights. He spoke of tragedy as it had dev-



eloped up to his time in Greece, rather than of an everlasting and invariable type of drama.<sup>4</sup>

And Gassner's final statement may indeed be an illuminating one in the context of the comparison of modern tragedy as represented by Absalom, Absalom! and the principles of classical tragedy as presented in the Poetics. Even though the form and structure of tragedy may have changed a great deal since the Athenian age, he raises the possibility that the real difficulty in applying Aristotle's concepts of tragedy to modern art is not so much that modern tragedy does not follow all of Aristotle's principles as that it is our evaluations of the relative importance of the various components of his tragic pattern and our interpretations of them which may often be at fault. There may have been too much emphasis on the objective and mechanistic elements such as "quantitative parts", "wholeness", "magnitude", and plot "complexity", which may be peculiar to the work of some of the tragedians of Aristotle's day, and insufficient understanding of his more subjective and subtle principles such as the poet as a "maker", the interaction of pity and fear in "catharsis", and the concept of an "imitation of an action". Perhaps these latter principles are still relevant in tragic art and perhaps this is the reason why criticism





of tragedy still tends to revert, consciously or unconsciously, to the concepts presented in the Poetics.

As we have examined Absalom, Absalom! in the context of Aristotle's less rigid and prescriptive principles it has been apparent that Faulkner has not completely abandoned classical theory. Indeed, as we have seen, he appears to make use of some portions of Aristotle's tragic pattern, particularly the subjective principles of the cathartic interaction of pity and fear, the idea of the writer as a "maker", and the concept of the tragic work as an "imitation of an action". But since Faulkner's tragedy also seems to incorporate Unamuno's speculative concept of the tragic sense of life, perhaps the fact that he combines this concept with some of Aristotle's principles is the reason that Absalom, Absalom! succeeds as a tragic work of art. It may be that Faulkner, whether by instinct or by calculation, or by both, uses this combination to bring the reader to the point in which the tragedy is created within his own consciousness. In his search for truth and meaning in the work, and in his attempts to grasp the tragic vision that the author is projecting, the reader ultimately provides the environment in which whatever tragedy the artist wishes to create must finally exist. As we manage to achieve some understanding of the



tragic vision that Faulkner is projecting in Absalom,  
Absalom!, we come to contemplate the meaning of life and  
the destiny of man and we ultimately experience a sense  
of transcendence and awe as we accept the artist's vision  
of the mystery and timelessness of humanity's suffering.



## NOTES

### Chapter I

<sup>1</sup> Miguel De Unamuno, Tragic Sense of Life, trans. J.E. Crawford Flitch (New York: Dover Publications, 1954), pp. 1-18.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 24-25.

<sup>8</sup> Richard B. Sewall, "The Tragic Form," in Tragedy: Modern Essays in Criticism, eds. Laurence Michel and Richard B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 119-120.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, The Poetics, trans. S.H Butcher, intro. Francis Fergusson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), p. 61.

This Dramabook edition will be used for references henceforth in this thesis; the page numbers appearing in parentheses and preceded by "PO" will refer to this particular edition.

<sup>10</sup> W. Hamilton Fyfe, ed., Aristotle's Art of Poetry (1940; rpt. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), pp. 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> Teddy Brunius, Inspiration and Katharsis (Uppsala, Sweden: Almqvist and Wiksells, 1966), pp. 52-54.





<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 52-53.

<sup>15</sup> Gerald F. Else, "Aristotle on Catharsis," in Tragedy: Modern Essays in Criticism, eds. Laurence Michel and Richard B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 268-270, argues rather circuitously that catharsis "is not a change or end-product in the spectator's soul . . . but a process carried forward in the emotional material of the play by its structural elements . . ." Thus Else shifts the emphasis from the beholder to the tragic structure of the work itself. While he does not deny the emotional impact of catharsis, he contends that it is a "transitive or operational factor" which must be "'built into' the plot."

<sup>16</sup> Brunius, pp. 60-67.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>20</sup> S.H. Butcher, Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art, 4th ed., prefatory essay John Gassner (New York: Dover Publications, 1951), p. 263.

## Chapter II

<sup>1</sup> John Jones, On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy (London: Chatto and Windus, 1962), pp. 13-20, contends, however, that "there is no evidence--not a shred--that Aristotle entertained the concept of the tragic hero." This critic argues that the whole notion of the tragic hero is a romantic idea that has been "imported". The critical preoccupation with the concept of the tragic hero, says Jones, "is a narrowing and distorting influence . . . nearly always baneful", which has little or no value in interpreting Aristotle on tragedy.



Although Jones' point of view is stimulating and refreshingly different, he appears to overlook the fact that the Greek tragedy with which Aristotle is concerned --particularly that of Sophocles--tends to concentrate on one central figure or protagonist and that the portrayal of the motivations of this central figure is one of the main tragic devices employed.

<sup>2</sup> F.L. Lucas, Tragedy (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), p. 135.

<sup>3</sup> Butcher, pp. 317-325, systematically examines the various concepts of Aristotle's "hamartia" including "an error due to inadequate knowledge of particular circumstances", in which the error is unintentional, and a "fault or error where the act is conscious and intentional, but not deliberate. Such are acts committed in anger or passion." But even though Butcher is well aware of the textual difficulties in translation, he finally concludes that the "tragic flaw" theory--"any human frailty or moral weakness, a flaw of character that is not tainted by a vicious purpose"--is the one that is ultimately most acceptable to Aristotle: "The great frailty will then be a moral frailty."

Humphry House, Aristotle's Poetics, rev. Colin Hardie (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1956), p. 94 and n. 2, argues that the "phrase 'tragic flaw' should be treated with suspicion." He considers that "hamartia" is a "specific error which a man makes or commits", and goes on to point out that: "I think I can safely say that all modern Aristotelian scholarship agrees with them [referring to Ingram Bywater, ed. and trans., Aristotle on the Art of Poetry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909), p. 215 and Augusto Rostagni, Aristotele Poetica: Introduzione Testo E Commento, 2nd ed. (Turin: Chiantore, 1945), p. 71], that 'hamartia' means an error which is derived from 'ignorance of some material fact or circumstance.'"

<sup>4</sup> Robert R. Dyer, "Hamartia in the Poetics and Aristotle's Model of Failure," Arion, 4, No.4 (Winter, 1965), 662.

<sup>5</sup> House, p. 96.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 97.



<sup>7</sup> William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom! (New York: Random House, 1964), pp. 171-172.

This Modern Library edition will be used for references henceforth in this thesis; the page numbers appearing in parentheses and preceded by "AA" will refer to this particular edition.

<sup>8</sup> Irving Howe, William Faulkner: A Critical Study, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1952), p. 222.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 222-223.

<sup>10</sup> Lynn Gartrell Levins, Faulkner's Heroic Design (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1976), p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Sullivan, "The Tragic Design of Absalom, Absalom!," South Atlantic Quarterly, 50, No.4 (Oct., 1951), 560.

<sup>12</sup> Ilse Dusoier Lind, "The Design and Meaning of Absalom, Absalom!," in William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism, eds. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1960), pp. 298-299.

<sup>13</sup> Duncan Aswell, "The Puzzling Design of Absalom, Absalom!," Kenyon Review, 30, No.1 (1968), 72.

<sup>14</sup> Cleanth Brooks, "Absalom, Absalom: The Definition of Innocence," Sewanee Review, 59 (1951), 543-558.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 555-556.

<sup>16</sup> Howe, p. 223.

<sup>17</sup> Levins, pp. 43-45, contends that while Sutpen does not recognize the reason for the failure of his design, his "heroic stature" is reaffirmed at the moment of his death because "he does realize the fact of failure. This recognition prompts him to give the fatal insult to Milly, by which he succeeds in taunting Jones into killing him."







But apart from Shreve's conjecture that Sutpen "would have to taunt the grandfather into killing first him and then the child too" (AA,292), there appears to be little textual evidence that Sutpen actively seeks death at Wash Jones' hands. And in any case, in the context of our discussion, Sutpen--as Levins concedes--never experiences Aristotle's ultimate tragic "recognition".

<sup>18</sup> Lind, p. 296.

<sup>19</sup> M.E. Bradford, "Brother, Son, and Heir: The Structural Focus of Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!," Sewanee Review, 78, No.1 (Winter, 1970), 82-83.

<sup>20</sup> Richard B. Sewall, The Vision of Tragedy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 146.

### Chapter III

<sup>1</sup> See Lennart Björk, "Ancient Myths and the Moral Framework of Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!," American Literature, 35, No.2 (May, 1963), 197-199, for an examination of the analogies between Absalom, Absalom! and the tragedy of Agamemnon.

<sup>2</sup> Many of the ideas incorporated in this paragraph are from Levins, pp. 47-52.

<sup>3</sup> Sophocles, King Oedipus, trans. W.B. Yeats, ed. Balachandra Rajan (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1969), p. 92.

<sup>4</sup> Sophocles, Oedipus at Colonus, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1941), p. 130.

<sup>5</sup> It can be argued with some justification that there is no concrete evidence that Bon is undeniably Sutpen's son. And certainly in the maze of conjecture, half-truths, and fabrication that are a part of Quentin and Shreve's imaginings, it is extremely difficult to is-



olate "factual" information. But for our purposes, it does not seem to be especially significant whether or not there is "proof" of the relationship since we are concerned with the motivations of Sutpen and Bon if they consider themselves to be father and son.

For a detailed and carefully researched examination of this lack of evidence, and of other facts and events that are difficult to substantiate in Absalom, Absalom!, see Cleanth Brooks, William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 429-440.

<sup>6</sup> Sophocles, Oedipus at Colonus, p. 107.

<sup>7</sup> II Samuel 7:16.

<sup>8</sup> Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, eds., Faulkner in the University (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1959), p. 73.

<sup>9</sup> II Samuel 18:33.

<sup>10</sup> Levins, p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> Olga W. Vickery, The Novels of William Faulkner, rev. ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), p. 97.

<sup>12</sup> Melvin Seiden, "Faulkner's Ambiguous Negro," Massachusetts Review, 4, No.4 (Summer, 1963), 686.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 678.

<sup>14</sup> "Faulkner's Universality," in The Maker and The Myth, eds. Evans Harrington and Ann J. Abadie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1978), pp. 146-166.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 155.



## Chapter IV

<sup>1</sup> House, p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 44-45.

<sup>3</sup> Butcher, p. 337.

<sup>4</sup> House, p. 74.

<sup>5</sup> Butcher, p. 281.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 282.

<sup>7</sup> House, p. 51.

<sup>8</sup> Leon Golden, trans., Aristotle's Poetics, commentary O.B. Harrison, Jr. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 146.

<sup>9</sup> Butcher, pp. 284-285.

<sup>10</sup> Faulkner's Narrative (London: Yale University Press, 1973), p. 145.

<sup>11</sup> Part of the problem for readers of Absalom, Absalom! may be the lack of a "clean" manuscript. Although there are what appear to be deliberate errors and inconsistencies in the novel, and though Faulkner tends at times to ignore grammatical conventions, some of these "faults" or "errors" may be typographical. Good reference works to help resolve these kinds of difficulties are Cleanth Brooks, William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country and Gerald Langford, Faulkner's Revisions of Absalom, Absalom! (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971).

<sup>12</sup> Floyd C. Watkins, "What Happens in Absalom, Absalom!?," Modern Fiction Studies, 13, No.1 (Spring, 1967), 79-87, discusses the novel almost exclusively in terms of narrative technique. He is concerned with the "deliberate" errors and "planned" inconsistencies of





Absalom, Absalom! and concludes that: "Together all the inconsistencies in narration reflect the technique, the meanings, the aims, and the artistic accomplishments of the novel" (p.87).

<sup>13</sup> Peter Swiggart, "A Puritan Tragedy: Absalom, Absalom!," in The Art of Faulkner's Novels (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962), pp. 149-170. As the title indicates, Swiggart's discussion focuses on the Sutpen story, and in particular on the figure of Thomas Sutpen: "His life is made to symbolize the failure of Southern society, but the man himself is denied self-understanding. The rigid dimensions of his rational puritanism prevent him from perceiving the evil which his actions have brought into the world" (p.170).

<sup>14</sup> Hugh Michael Ruppensburg, "Narrative Mode in the Novels of William Faulkner," Diss. University of South Carolina, 1978, pp. 152-158.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 152-153.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>17</sup> Vickery, p. 102.

<sup>18</sup> John Lewis Longley, Jr., The Tragic Mask: A Study of Faulkner's Heroes (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), p. 208.

<sup>19</sup> Arthur L. Scott, "The Myriad Perspectives of Absalom, Absalom!," American Quarterly, 6, No.3 (Fall, 1954), 211.

<sup>20</sup> Vickery, p. 84.

<sup>21</sup> Levins, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> Some examples are: Levins, pp. 9-16; Vickery, pp. 87-88; Elizabeth M. Kerr, "Absalom, Absalom!: Faust in Mississippi, or, the Fall of the House of Sutpen," in William Faulkner's Gothic Domain (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1979), pp. 29-52.



<sup>23</sup> James Guetti, "Absalom, Absalom!: The Extended Simile," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Absalom, Absalom!, ed. Arnold Goldman (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 78.

<sup>24</sup> Vickery, p. 89.

<sup>25</sup> David L. Minter, "Apotheosis of the Form: Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!," in The Interpreted Design as a Structural Principle in American Prose (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), p. 199.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>27</sup> Lind, p. 282.

<sup>28</sup> John Middleton, "Shreve McCannon and Sutpen's Legacy," Southern Review, 10, No.1 (Jan., 1974), 115-124, contends that Shreve's remark that "'the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere'" is not a mark of a "detached and flippant cynicism" but instead is "the evidence of engaged and compassionate insight" (p.116).

But this remark, as Middleton concedes, places a great deal of emphasis on the racism inherent in Absalom, Absalom!: "Sutpen's legacy is the triumph of miscegenation, the survival of black blood, the eventual but invisible destruction of white purity" (p.122). And as we have seen earlier, the novel is not so much concerned with the problem of miscegenation per se as it is with the motivations that precipitate the reactions to miscegenation. Thus, in our reading, it is more likely to be Quentin--rather than Shreve--who gains the "compassionate insight" into the Sutpen myth, even though he may be incapable of acting upon it or even of articulating it.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Millgate, William Faulkner (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 53.

## Chapter V

<sup>1</sup> Longley, pp. 165-166.



<sup>2</sup> John Gassner, "The Possibilities and Perils of Modern Tragedy," in Tragedy: Vision and Form, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing, 1965), p. 405.

It is important to note that Gassner is not necessarily supporting this position, he is examining it as one point of view in the context of the state of the art of modern tragedy.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 406.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 409.





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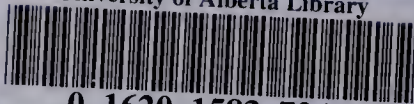
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